

SESSION 10

rites and symbols

Coordinated by Liv Nilsson Stutz and Tomasz Płonka

Rituals and symbols were an important part of life in Mesolithic societies. In this session, we invite papers that discuss various aspects of the symbolic culture and ritual practice among hunter-gatherer-fishers from the Early and Middle Holocene, including portable and rock art, graves and various manipulations of the human body, different types of ornaments and their use, ways of preparing and using pigments, and other artefacts and contexts related to the world of rituals and symbols of Stone Age foragers.

How can we identify ritual practice and symbols in the archaeological record from this period? How did these ritual practices and symbolic artefacts function? What role did they play in the life of hunter-gatherer-fisher groups, and how did they function in the social space? Who made symbolic artefacts and who used them? How were the media and raw material for symbolic communication selected and handled? What can the material culture record tell us about hunter-gatherer-fisher cosmologies?

One important focus for the session is the evidence of ritual practices and symbolic communication revealed through detailed contextual analysis. Another significant area is the theoretical approaches available to us as we interpret it. We welcome papers addressing both theoretical aspects of research on rituals and symbols within broader hunter-gatherer-fisher cosmology, and specific and detailed case studies.

ANIMATE STONE BODIES IN DEATH CONTEXTS

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In this paper I want to explore the diverse roles of lithics within Mesolithic funerary rites. Drawing on recent research, involving a broad range of analytical techniques (provenancing, technology, microwear etc), alongside contextual and spatial analyses of lithic artefacts from Northern European burials, to argue that some lithics, and their parts (e.g. axe blade edges) and treatment (e.g. intentional breakage) might reflect symbolic objects and behaviours, other lithics appear to acted as gendered animate beings, with their own life force. This ontological approach challenges the narrow viewpoint that has privileged cellular life forms - humans, non-human animals and plants over acellular (e.g. stone), even when such a distinction does not always exist within animist indigenous theory. Drawing on empirical evidence such as morphology, quantity, positioning in relation to the human body, prior use and other markers, I hope to illustrate the richness of information lithics, often regarded as utilitarian items, can provide about mortuary rites and rituals. In turn, opening up a discussion on what is stone within Mesolithic worldviews.

CRUSHED BONES AND BURNT GRAVE GOODS. A LATE MESOLITHIC DOUBLE GRAVE IN SOUTHERNMOST SWEDEN

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In connection with an investigation of a Viking Age settlement at Rinkaby, northeastern Scania, southernmost Sweden, a feature containing human bones was found. The bones were concentrated within a limited area of the feature and were in a markedly fragmented, but unburned, state. The teeth showed that the bones belonged to two persons a juvenile/ young adult and an adult. The grave is dated to the latter part of the Late Mesolithic period. The fragmentation of the bones indicates that the two individuals had been subjected to some form of soft tissue reduction. ¹³C and ¹⁵N isotope analysis indicates that they had a terrestrial and marine food base, respectively, and sequential strontium (⁸⁷Sr/⁸⁶Sr) analysis suggests they originated from different regions. In the same accumulation as the human bones, small burnt bone fragments were also found. They turned out to belong to a slotted bone dagger with double-sided ornamentation. The burial site with unburned remains of the dead and burnt grave goods, as well as the fragmentation, have no parallels in southernmost Scandinavia. The grave and its contents are discussed in relation to Mesolithic burial conditions.

EARLY MESOLITHIC BATONS WITH ORNAMENTATION AND THEIR MAGDALENIAN PREDECESSORS

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Perforated batons were one of characteristic artefacts for the Early Mesolithic of northwestern Europe. They were made of red deer antler beams. Traces of work indicate that they were used as tools, and the abrasion of the surface and ornamentation suggests they were used for a longer period of time. Many batons were ornamented not only with geometric patterns, but also with zoo- and anthropomorphic motifs. The ornamentation was sometimes organized within decorative zones separated from each other by various motifs. The patterns were sometimes filled with a dark inlay. The ornamentation was engraved in two ways: during one session or successively – during the use of the object. An example of the latter scenario is the baton from Szczecin-Podjuchy, while the artefacts from Pułtusk and Woźniki were made during single decorative actions. These differences probably reflect concepts about the relationship between ornamentation and the functionality of the object. This type of tool, usually made of reindeer antler, was known from the Upper Paleolithic, and was particularly common in the Magdalenian. However, there is no evidence that the Magdalenian specimens were prototypes of Mesolithic tools. Late Magdalenian batons are generally less massive and may have a few holes. They are also covered with very rich ornamentation, mainly with zoomorphic and geometrical motifs. The function of these tools is still hotly debated. Despite some similarity, Mesolithic and Magdalenian batons could have served different purposes – the latter are often broken at the perforation, while Mesolithic specimens usually have damaged distal ends.

GENERATIONS IMPLEMENTED IN CLAY: CERAMIC FIGURINES OF THE CIRCUM-BALTIC FOREST NEOLITHIC

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Ceramic anthropomorphic sculptures of the Forest Neolithic to the north and east of the Baltic Sea of the 4th-3rd millennium BC were produced by hunter-gatherer-fishers. Around 240 specimen are known. The most ancient examples have an embryonic form, while later ones resemble a wrapped body. Find contexts indicate connections with hearths and houses where the figures often occur in groups. While the embryo-shaped pieces were regularly found together with animal images (bird, snake, beaver, otter, elk), the wrapped body type (or Åland type) ones form scattered assemblages of exclusively human appearance.

Facial décor on some of the sculptures probably reflects tattooed or painted motifs, which may have had totemic connotations. Similar facial decor patterns on sculptures found up to 700 km apart may indicate trans-regional kinship ties. The body décor on the Åland type sculptures suggests that the wrapped body was tied with cords or strings. We will discuss which types of person might have been depicted by these sculptures. The embryo-shaped specimen might indeed represent human embryos, albeit sometimes with facial traits that resemble zoomorphic features. The upright posture of the Åland type pieces with protruding feet and cord tying might represent infants attached to cradleboards, as widely known from North American, Sami and Siberian Indigenous groups. The varying heights of sculptures might portray different social roles of the depicted individuals. Further studies of figurine outfit may help to reveal more peculiarities about the communities that produced them and of the Forest Neolithic life worlds more general.

MAPPING THE PAST AND SKETCHING THE FUTURE OF MESOLITHIC ART RESEARCH

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The study of Mesolithic art boasts a long and rich history. Yet, given the fragmented and uneven nature of both the archaeological record and the archaeological practice itself, the field is by no means in equilibrium. Not only preservation conditions, but also the strategies, practices, and theoretical foundations of regional research traditions are highly variable. This talk surveys South Scandinavian Mesolithic art research through two approaches: 1), a bibliometric analysis, and 2), a mapping of theoretical and epistemological perspectives. This systemised exploration honours the field's academic tradition while attempting to pinpoint the biases, imbalances and knowledge gaps that haunt the field to this day. Proposing a way forward, researchers of Mesolithic art should prioritise synthesising knowledge through international collaboration and data sharing. To this end, this talk presents an openly accessible and interactive digital platform of South Scandinavian corpus of Mesolithic art. With its inclusion of maps, artefact drawings, source literature, and other pertinent metadata, this platform is meant to both facilitate public engagement and as a shared repository for researchers to utilise and co-develop. International colleagues are encouraged to contribute to and expand this collaborative platform. By embracing Open Science principles of data stewardship, analytical transparency and public inclusion, such international collaboration will ultimately improve our collective understanding of the Mesolithic art phenomenon.

MESOLITHIC WATER FUNERALS IN COASTAL WESTERN NORWAY. NEW ANALYSES OF THE HUMAN SKELETONS FROM BØNES AND BLEIVIK

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This contribution presents results of the investigations of two Mesolithic human bone assemblages retrieved at bog sites on the coast of western Norway at the sites Bleivik and Bønes. C14-dates of the two assemblages show relatively similar results, to the Middle Mesolithic, c. 7200-6700 cal BC. Morphologically, there are differences between the crania from the two sites, however, both skeletons are from adult male individuals. Stable carbon and nitrogen isotopes analyzed from both individuals have lived on marine food, which is in accordance with the current knowledge about this part of the Stone Age in western Norway. The find-spot of the Bleivik skeleton suggests that he had been deposited in the sea relatively close to the shore. Freshwater diatoms in the skull of the Bønes skeleton, on the other hand, indicates that his body after death had been deposited in a small pond. While accidental drowning as cause of death cannot be ruled out for either of them, a quite as likely interpretation is that they were deposited during funerary rituals in wet environments. Water funerals are known to have happened amongst hunter-fisher populations in the recent past and were clearly practiced amongst Mesolithic populations elsewhere in Scandinavia. This interpretative option is supported by the results of a review of Mesolithic stray-finds in western Norway, which show that a relatively high percentage of them were deposited in the sea – possibly as parts of funerary rituals.

MICRO-ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON HUMAN-ANIMAL IDENTITIES IN THE LATE MESOLITHIC SKATEHOLM I AND II CEMETERIES, SWEDEN

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Animal originated materials recovered in mortuary contexts contain evidence of the relationships between human and non-human lifeways. Animal tooth pendants, burial goods made of bone, antler, teeth, and shell, as well as unworked animal remains can be understood as material representations of the cosmology and social links between humans and animals. Due to the poor preservation of soft organic materials, an important group of materials such as fur, feathers, and hair has been out of the scope of empirical research. However, the recent research has shown that microscopic remains of fibres can be detected not only in the surfaces of stone and bone tools but also in the soil samples. This presentation deals with the soil samples analysed in the Late Mesolithic Skateholm I and II cemeteries in the southern Sweden. In total 35 burials out of the 87 graves were included for the analyses. As a result, 83 feather fragments and 94 hair particles were recovered. The species composition and the distribution of fibres evidence the importance of clothes made of fur and feathers in identity building. The results will be discussed in relation to ethnographic references documented in north European forest regions. The research is part of Animals Make Identities (AMI) project (ERC Grant agreement No. 864358).

MUMMIFICATION IN THE MESOLITHIC. PUTTING A NEWLY DISCOVERED RITUAL PRACTICE INTO PERSPECTIVE

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A recent interdisciplinary analysis of old photographs from an excavation in the shell midden in Arapouco in the Sado Valley (Portugal) revealed evidence of guided mummification of a corpse before burial. The discovery of what to date is the world's oldest case of mummification was unexpected, but a close examination of a couple of other graves in the valley showed indications of similar treatment, albeit significantly less clearly. While mummification has not been demonstrated anywhere else in the Mesolithic mortuary record, important studies in the past several decades have discussed the evidence of other forms of extended and hands-on and presumably ritualized practices involving the treatment of the dead. In this paper we discuss how we can understand mummification of the body during the Mesolithic as a ritual practice that would have been an integral part of the hunter-gatherer-fisher cosmology. The paper places the Arapouco case in a context of both Mesolithic mortuary ritual and ethnographic cases of mummification in small scale societies.

OF POWDER AND BONES: QUESTIONING THE USE OF OCHRE IN THE MESOLITHIC MORTUARY PRACTICES IN NORTHERN FRANCE

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The use of pigments in Mesolithic mortuary practices is a widespread phenomenon in Europe. In France, pigments associated with Mesolithic human remains are mainly attested in the east and along the coast. In the Paris Basin, the use of pigments is rare and mostly described by the presence/absence of brown-red staining. As part of our PhD thesis focusing on the manipulation of the dead during the Mesolithic in Northern France and Belgium, a new study of the osseous human assemblages of Berry-au-Bac (Aisne, France) and Noyen-sur-Seine (Seine-et-Marne, France), which show brown-red traces interpreted as ochre, has been realized. In addition to analyzing the distribution and intensity of the brown-red colorations, the chemical composition of the residues identified on the human remains has been established using a Scanning Electron Microscope in order to determine their nature. Our analysis aims to verify the use of pigments, or to highlight new hypotheses such as post-depositional contamination by the surrounding environment. These data update our knowledge of the use of pigments in the funerary practices of Mesolithic populations in the Paris Basin. They also shed new light on the need to better analyze the brown-red staining of the osseous surface of human bones, particularly those from "old" excavations and for which the presence of ochre was first reported. The SEM thus appears to be a key methodological tool to address such issues, enabling us to go beyond than simple observation in the field and to support palethnologic interpretations with verified optical and physico-chemical data.

ORNAMENTAL TYPES AND DECORATION TECHNIQUES IN THE CONTEXT OF BONE INDUSTRIES DURING THE TRANSITION PERIOD (LATE 7TH – EARLY 6TH MILLENNIUM CAL BC)

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The technological repertoire for bone artefact manufacture often differs substantially from that employed in their decoration. Whilst some ornamental techniques, such as engraving, are universal and timeless, others are distinctly specific, being closely associated with particular decorative types and culturally-determined visual imagery. The rich ornamental traditions observed at some Mesolithic sites encompass a wide variety of figurative motifs executed through various techniques and combinations, showing minimal standardisation. This suggests either population heterogeneity or an extended chronological span that eludes conventional archaeological methods. This study examines the correlations between ornamental types, technical methods and functional contexts of over 300 artefacts crafted from hard organic materials (bone and elk antler). The analysis focuses on Late and Final Mesolithic assemblages industries (late 7th – early 6th millennium cal BC) from the multi-layered site of Zamostje 2 in the Upper Volga basin. The integration of symbolic practices into daily activities not only demonstrates their significance within late Mesolithic societies but also facilitates the identification of cultural distinctiveness and enables a more nuanced understanding of historical phenomena.

SYMBOLISM EXPRESSED THROUGH ARTEFACTUAL DEPOSITS OF ANTLERS AND HUMAN BONES FROM MESOLITHIC BURIALS AT HOËDIC (MORBIHAN) AND MAS D'AZIL (ARIÈGE)

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The symbolic framework within which Mesolithic burial practices developed is discussed, based on the study of minimally transformed human and animal bones found in burials. These bones, testifying to decarnation actions on the human body, indicate established practices for the reduction of corpses for prolonged preservation. These bones, which bear witness to incarnation through the material deposits in the burials, suggest the care taken by the group to ensure certain human conditions during the transition to or for the afterlife. In both cases, the technical actions or measures taken were suitable for burying human bodies using common symbolic representations. These human or animal remains deposited in graves can therefore be analysed in the same way as any bone artefact i.e., as a material that has been transformed according to an anthropological concept, which can thus be emphasised by the technological approach to bone material. The identification of the artefacts in terms of their symbolic meaning is based on the osteo-anatomical contextualisation of the marks left on the surface of the bone by technical action, in the case of reduced cadavers, and on the contextualisation of the finds, once their nature has been identified, in the case of deposits. The presentation will focus on two archaeological series to illustrate both these cases: the recently dated cut human bones from the Mas d'Azil cave in Ariège and the antler remains recently re-attributed to the Hoëdic burials in Morbihan (France).

THE DOG BURIAL FROM LJUNGAVIKEN -PERSPECTIVES ON MESOLITHIC DOGS

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A dog burial was found during excavations 2019 of the Mesolithic settlement Ljungaviken located by the Baltic Sea coast in southern Sweden. The dog was buried in a pit nearby house structures and have been radiocarbon dated to ca 6,600 BCE and is contemporary with the settlement. The size of the dogs is typical of Mesolithic dogs from South Scandinavia. The morphology of skull and mandible show similarities to other Early Mesolithic with large teeth and massive jaws, which differ from the Late Mesolithic dogs. The postcranial slenderness and body proportion of the dog resembles that of wolves. Findings of microscopic fibres of feathers indicate that the dog has been buried on a bed of feathers and microblades of flint placed by the paws of the dog could be interpreted as grave gifts. The dog burial from Ljungaviken has been compared to other burials and depositions of dog remains from South Scandinavia to evaluate the ritual practice concerning dogs in the Mesolithic. The resemblance of dog burial with human burials indicates a personhood of certain dogs, while most dogs were treated differently and found among refuse, as some human remains. The dog burial from Ljungaviken contribute with additional perspectives and understanding of the ritual practice and role of dogs in the Mesolithic societies.

THE TRADITION THAT UNITES. THE CONSERVATISM OF THE BURIAL RITES AT THE STONE AGE HUNTER-GATHERER SITES DUDKA AND SZCZEPANKI IN MASURIA, NE-POLAND

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Dudka and Szczepanki are two sites located on the former Staświn Lake in Masuria, NE-Poland. Both were settled from the Late Palaeolithic to the end of the Late Neolithic and the forager economy was maintained until the end of the Stone Age. The local community turned out to be exceptionally conservative in terms of rituals. The main cemetery at Dudka was used mainly c. 4300-3400 cal BC, i.e. in the Para-Neolithic Zedmar culture, when settlement had permanent character and the local population clearly increased. The various burial practices were used in this period (e.g. secondary burials, primary in sitting position and cremation), which are one of distinctive features and peculiarities of the Zedmar culture. Many of them, however, can be of Mesolithic origin. Both sites yielded evidence of long-term memory about the ritual places, customs and probably also beliefs. For example the main cemetery was located in a place used for burial purposes in the Late Mesolithic (grave VI-17) and the single interment was deposited there in the end of the Late Neolithic (grave VI-18). Moreover, the oldest and the youngest burials are very similar to each other. Similar continuity from the Mesolithic to Zedmar culture or even to the Late Neolithic applies also to the temporary and washed out human and dog burials at Dudka and Szczepanki, which were placed in the same spots of the settlement areas near the lake coastline.

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VARIABILITY OF BURIAL PRACTICES IN THE MIDDLE MESOLITHIC THROUGH THE RECENT DISCOVERY OF NEW BURIALS IN YVELINES (FRANCE)

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The recent discovery of ten new burials in the Yvelines department (France), doubling the number of graves for this period, has renewed the issues dealing with funerary practices during the Middle Mesolithic (second half of the 8th millennium BC). Despite their relative geographical proximity, on a departmental scale, these graves show a diversity of mortuary practices, regardless of the age or sex of the deceased, in terms of burial methods, body treatment grave arrangement. Individuals can be laid on their backs, seated or crouched, without preferred orientation. Some of their positions, especially on the lower limbs suggest an intentional arrangement in order to maintain them in unnatural position, using flexible wrappings and/or bindings. Regarding the deposits, individual inhumation is most often used. Nevertheless, at least one case of successive burial is attested. Secondary burials are also identified, as well as the use of cremation. Specific features can be observed around or above the bones, and the funerary structure, when it is observable, may show original digging. Some of these burials, distributed in small groups of relative contemporaneity, suggest a memory of the place. These burials well reflect the diversity of mortuary practices during the Middle Mesolithic recognized in the Ile-de-France region and, more broadly, in the northern half of France. However, some of the burials show some gestures that still elude us, suggesting a complex burial program for this chronological period.

RITUAL BY THE SEA: UNVEILING THE SYMBOLISM OF MARINE REFERENCES IN THE COSMOLOGY OF LATE HUNTER-FISHER-GATHERER COMMUNITIES IN SOUTHWESTERN EUROPE

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Marine resources, although rarely analysed, hold immense potential for understanding the symbolic significance of the sea in the ritual practices of late hunter-fisher-gatherer communities. The sea, primary source of sustenance, also became a symbolic stage in death, playing a central role in the construction of their identities.

The distribution of similar artifacts along the Atlantic coasts of the Iberian Peninsula and Western France, as well as the recurrence of specific practices—such as the selection of shells as personal ornaments and the depiction of marine fauna in prehistoric art—demonstrates how the integration of marine items into daily life and funerary practices reflects shared beliefs connected to the sea, originating in the Upper Palaeolithic and evolving during the Mesolithic.

Nevertheless, the meaning of these practices remains elusive and requires further investigation. As part of the MSCA Doctoral Network ArCHe, to fill this gap, this paper presents the initial results of a new multidisciplinary approach combining iconographic, malacological, and contextual analyses to clarify the role of the sea in shaping the cosmology of these communities. The SEART dataset serves as a tool for the interactive exploration and comparison of parietal and portable marine depictions attested in Southwestern Europe. Additionally, the malacological analysis of shells from Cantabrian sites has provided insights into the evolution of shell bead symbolism and its meaning over time.

This paper aims to deepen understanding of the symbolic role of the sea for these communities, emphasizing its evolution during the Mesolithic as a key period of cultural transformation.

FORGOTTEN, HIDDEN, OR CAREFULLY DEPOSITED?

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In 2022, an out-of-the-ordinary archaeological find was discovered at the Middle Mesolithic site Roverud 4, located in the south-western Oslofjord region of Norway. Upon removing a thin soil layer, a total of 16 macro blades were collected from a 0.3 m² section. The blades varied in length (4.4–12.4 cm) and included a diverse range of blades: some with cortex, some with crested dorsal sides, others with lateral retouches, and some that displayed visible use wear. In addition to the macro blades, eight pieces of flint debris were also retrieved. Altogether, these 24 flint artifacts were identified as originating from the same Bryozoan flint nodule yet representing different stages of a blade production process. Importantly, there was no preserved evidence of disturbance of the surrounding soil, such as pit filling or discoloration. The assortment of macro flint blades significantly exceeds the usual debitage found at Middle Mesolithic sites, making it clear from the outset that this find offers rare insight into a Middle Mesolithic practice involving macro flint tool technology. The find indicates that selected blades could have been deposited intentionally – as a ritual deposit or as a cache. As such, this blade collection represents a remarkable archaeological discovery from a Middle Mesolithic settlement site in Southern Norway. The presentation will explore various interpretations of the possible functions that a macro blade collection might have served as part of Middle Mesolithic settlement activities, including specific depositional practices and their economic, social, and ritual context.

THE "SHAMAN" BURIAL OF BAD DÜRRENBURG, SAXONY-ANHALT, GERMANY - NEW MULTIDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

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The double burial of an adult woman and an infant, discovered in 1934 during construction work at the spa gardens in Bad Dürrenberg is considered one of the most significant Mesolithic burial finds in Central Europe. The woman, buried in a crouched or seated position alongside the infant, was accompanied by an extraordinary array of grave goods. These included flint and ground stone tools, bone and antler artifacts, a piece of red ochre, animal bones including the shells of pond turtles, as well as perforated and unperforated teeth from bovids, red deer, and wild boar. Notably, a roe deer antler mask and boar tusks—likely used as head or body ornaments—were also found. The burial's distinctive assemblage has led to its interpretation as that of a shaman. Pathological features on the woman's anterior teeth, cervical vertebrae, and skull base further support this hypothesis. Subsequent excavations in 2019, conducted as part of preparations for the State Garden Exhibition, provided new insights of the burial. These investigations also uncovered numerous additional finds that could be definitively linked to the burial. Furthermore, the excavations provided evidence of a complex construction of the burial pit, as well as a second pit close to the burial containing two red deer antler masks. Genetic analysis of the woman revealed her to be a typical representative of Western Hunter-Gatherers. The recovery of the infant's petrous bone also enabled a genetic analysis of this individual, adding a new dimension to our understanding of this remarkable burial.

HUMAN SKELETONS IN MOTION, DEFLESHED ANIMALS IN ACTION AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF SPECIES' IN THE NORTHERN TRADITION ROCK ART OF SCANDINAVIA. A PRESERVED PROXY FOR INSIGHT INTO WORLD VIEWS OF THE MESOLITHIC

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The challenges in Mesolithic research, and interpretations, is to look thousands of years back in time on traces of human activity and at the same time free our minds, methods and approaches of modern knowledge and avoid the latter being projected onto the past. One often faces that archaeological material from distant and unknown past conditions in the process of being excavated are contaminated by modern standards as soon as it is unearthed, that may ignore unusual conditions or anomalies for a western eye. It is therefore a need to understand the Mesolithic on their own premises, with past surroundings most likely perceived as animated, and possible cosmological past realities in the border zone between life and death and between species'. This is where narratives in rock art – with complex compilations of anthropomorphs and animals – can be a valuable source. Taking into consideration global ethnographic approaches to cultures, comparable with Mesolithic societies, demonstrating that numerous cultures draw no clear ontological distinctions between humans, different types of animals, and plant species thus emphasizing the relevance of conditions displayed in the iconography. It will therefore be argued that on the basis of more nuanced dating of the Northern Tradition rock art in which past relations are preserved, the iconography can work as a relevant proxy for insight into Mesolithic world views.

MESOLITHIC ART IN ITALY. TRADITIONS, INNOVATIONS, REGIONALISATIONS, TRANSTERRITORIAL CONNECTIONS

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The Italian Mesolithic figurative evidence is less abundant than the one of the final Upper Paleolithic. This scarcity is also evident within individual sites, with the exception of Grotta delle Veneri and Grotta Marisa, in Salento (Apulia). The Author presents a synthesis framework highlighting the following themes: 1-Importance of the Epigravettian tradition and innovation aspects. The engraved stones from Grotta del Cavallo (Lecce) date to the final Epigravettian ("Romanellian" facies) and Early Mesolithic ("Epiromanellian" facies), showing a continuous local graphic tradition in Salento which is also found at Grotta Romanelli. Epigravettian productions feature rare zoomorphic figures with geometric-linear signs, while Mesolithic ones emphasize geometric-linear patterns. Sites like Grotta delle Veneri and grotta Marisa together with Grotta dei Cervi belong to the latter. This trend characterises also other sites across Apulia. 2-Typology of sign alphabets. Salento's Paleo-Mesolithic iconographic production (Grotta del Cavallo and Grotta Romanelli) has a codified sign repertoire, with rare naturalistic (10%) and frequent non-naturalistic (90%) signs, structured or unstructured. 3-Stylistic variability in relation to the geographical location. The rare evidence from Trentino (north-eastern Italy) seems to indicate a completely different trend compared to the one attested in southern Italy. 4-Iconographic practice as an indicator of connections between different cultural regions even over long distances. Azilian art, emerging in the Pyrenees in the Late Glacial, spreads across the Mediterranean, reaching the coasts of Italy and stopping at eastern Sicily. This graphic style has remained homogeneous, continuing into the Early Mesolithic across various cultural facies.

THE MESOLITHIC NEEDLE IN THE HAYSTACK. REASSESSING MATERIAL CULTURE AND HUMAN REMAINS FROM GROTTA MOSER (TRIESTE KARST, ITALY) AT THE NHMW, VIENNA

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One hundred forty years ago, local enthusiast Ludwig Karl Moser began researching the Trieste Karst in northeastern Italy, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He focused on excavating caves, including the so-called Grotta Moser (Jama na Dolech), which yielded a rich stratigraphic sequence and two burials. Large parts of Moser's collection, including the lithic and osseous assemblages and two human skulls from Grotta Moser, later reached the Natural History Museum Vienna (NHMW). A reassessment of Moser's collection and recent examination of his diaries led to a tentative proposition of a Mesolithic chronology for the burials found in Grotta Moser, previously considered Roman. This gave impulse to a reconsideration of the two skulls in the Anthropological collection of the NHMW, including the performance of radiocarbon dating, which confirmed an Early Mesolithic attribution. The unexpected outcome spurred a revaluation of the entire Grotta Moser assemblage. With this poster, we aim to present initial results on the site's biography and ongoing analysis of its material culture, including the provenance and techno-morphological aspects of the lithic assemblage, alongside a techno-typological study of osseous artefacts. An anthropological study of the skulls, including aDNA and stable isotope analyses, is underway. In doing so, we aim to shed light on these previously unknown Mesolithic burials from the Trieste Karst, by highlighting the rites connected to the deposition of the two individuals, as well as tackling questions such as the mobility and subsistence of the groups who occupied Grotta Moser at the beginning of the Holocene.

MESOLITHIC BURIALS AND FUNERARY PRACTICES IN CENTRAL ITALY: NEW EVIDENCE FROM RIPARO BLANC (MOUNT CIRCEO, LATIUM)

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Up to recently the Mesolithic funerary record was poorly documented in Central Italy. Riparo Blanc, a small rockshelter of Mount Circeo in southern Latium overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea, adds relevant new information. The site, at the base of a limestone cliff, was first excavated by Istituto Italiano di Paleontologia Umana in 1960-1963 and again by our team of Sapienza University of Rome in 2016-2019. It yielded a Mesolithic deposit dated 11,300-9,500 cal BP, with abundant seashells, faunal remains and lithic artifacts. Past and recent excavations have also uncovered a primary burial and a considerable quantity of human fossil bones in secondary deposits, classified as post-Mesolithic during the 1960s. Through the meticulous reassessment of archival and stratigraphic data, complemented by new radiocarbon dates, Riparo Blanc is now established as a significant burial site dating to the Early Holocene. After the analysis of both the burial and the reworked human remains, the minimum number of individuals is established as seven including adults, juveniles, and infants. Accordingly, this funerary record is one of the largest Mesolithic ones in Italy and on the Mediterranean coast. Notably, at least one humerus exhibits signs indicative of post-mortem manipulation, specifically cut marks consistent with defleshing. Archaeological and taphonomic studies suggest that in the Early Holocene Riparo Blanc was a burial site where multiple practices were undertaken, thereby shedding for the first time light on the funerary behaviors of Early Holocene groups in Central Italy.

A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD BURIAL. MULTIDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS OF THE ORGANIC RESIDUES INCLUDED IN THE BURIAL GOODS OF MONDEVAL DE SORA - VF1 (BELLUNO DOLOMITES, ITALY)

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The burial found at the high-altitude site of Mondeval de Sora - VF1 (Belluno Dolomites, Italy; 2130 m asl) is one of the richest and best-preserved ones of the Late Mesolithic in Southern Europe. The deceased was placed supine within an elliptical-shaped pit with outstretched limbs. Sixty items were carefully arranged on and around the body, suggesting the existence of a specific funerary ritual. Most of these objects were found grouped in three assemblages placed on the left side of the deceased. These were interpreted as the remains of three bags made of organic material, containing numerous lithic and osseous artefacts and two lumps of organic amorphous residues. Recently, the lithic artefacts included in the burial goods have been the object of a traceological re-examination aimed at identifying the presence of transport-related wear. All the artefacts have been analysed in detail at low- and high-magnification. Besides the multiple types of wear, the presence of organic and inorganic residues on the chert artefacts motivated further analytical developments such as SEM microscopy, GC-MS and Raman spectroscopy. The results of these analyses show that all analysed artefacts (including the amorphous lumps) revealed the presence of red ochre, which led to the preservation of various plant microremains, especially grass phytoliths and, to a lesser extent, micro-fragments of wood and charcoal. GC-MS analyses of micro-samples taken on the blades were negative, while the biomolecular characterisation of the lumps is still ongoing. This presentation aims to report our results and discuss preliminary hypotheses regarding these findings.

PHOTOGRAMMETRY OF BOULDER ARTWORKS FROM LEPENSKI VIR

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The boulder sculptures of Lepenski Vir represent one of the most unique and rare examples of Mesolithic monumental art in Europe. Lepenski Vir is situated in the Danube Gorges area of the north-central Balkans. Here, sandstone artworks, depicting hybrid human-fish figures or dressed in geometric motifs, are intricately associated with the trapezoid-shaped building floors and central hearths associated with phase I-II that dates to 6150–5920 cal BCE. Multiple interpretations have emerged regarding their purpose, including their symbolic role, connections to burials, and spatial associations with living spaces. This paper introduces ongoing research focused on re-documenting these boulders by means of advanced 3D technologies, alongside technological and functional analyses aimed at exploring their potential uses and methods of production. Particular emphasis is placed on the artisan skills required to create these artefacts, their role within Mesolithic symbolic and ritual practices as well as their possible use in every-day practices. By combining high-resolution imaging, use-wear and residue analysis, and contextual studies, we aim to shed light on the profound interplay between this artisan expression, beliefs, and daily life at the very end of the Mesolithic in southeastern Europe.