
Cutting heads and social ties: Biochemical and material culture approaches to shifting relations in Iron Age Southern France (ca. 5th - 2nd centuries BCE)

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Résumé

For over a century, appearance of new social-political arrangements during the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE in southern France (the Midi) has been premised on the supposed emergence, from at least the 5th century BCE, of a warrior elite, and the eventual domination of society by powerful family lineages. This process of elite emergence and hegemony has been supposed, *de rigueur*, as concurrent with and causally linked to changes in regional and extra-regional circulation patterns, including trends towards sedentarization, urbanization, control of territory, economic specialization, and gradual integration into a broader Mediterranean market economy. Without rejecting this framework out of hand, it is important to acknowledge that new archaeological data is often forced into this framework; many material developments in the Midi (e.g. statuary, specialized architecture) are then perfunctorily cast as epiphenomena of certain groups' ascendancy to control of the political economy and subsequent cultural hegemony via, amongst other things, heroization of powerful male warriors. Yet, archaeological evidence increasingly suggests that, especially in Eastern Languedoc (Gard, Hérault), the society was relatively egalitarian until at least the mid-2nd century BCE. Thus, it is worth considering whether the emergence of institutionalized power hierarchies was a result, rather than a cause, of shifting networks of circulation and changing social relations. Prime example of a phenomenon conventionally interpreted as the product of a warrior society are *têtes coupées* – human cephalic remains displayed in ritual contexts, best evinced in the 3rd century BCE levels of Le Cailar (Gard). Historically, these have been interpreted a priori as either battle trophies (signs of martial prowess, power), or relics of venerated ancestors (likely, male warriors). This paper discusses the use of isotope biochemistry to make a direct, empirical assessment of the *têtes coupées* from Le Cailar, paired with an analysis of material culture in the region to examine emergence of this phenomenon as (a) result of shifting patterns of regional circulation, (b) social and physical evidence for new types of intraregional circulation that may have then contributed to the eventual emergence institutionalized power hierarchies. For instance, might *têtes coupées* evince thirst-induced raiding? Certainly, diachronic examination of ceramic distributions seems to suggest that *têtes coupées* first appear in a context where circulation of imported

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wine was disrupted between coastal trading sites, (e.g. Le Cailar) and sites of the interior. Similarly, isotopic values for a subgroup of *têtes coupées* from Le Cailar might suggest they originated from those wine-deprived hinterlands.

Mots-Clés: Isotope biochemistry, *têtes coupées*, Iron Age, Le Cailar, political economy, hierarchy