
The ‘silent millennia’: Population dynamics and social interaction along Mediterranean Africa during the Late Holocene

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Résumé

This paper presents the results of a programme of gathering and modelling of already published data, carried out in the framework of the ‘*MedAfrica – Archaeological deep history and dynamics of Mediterranean Africa, 9600-700 BC*’ project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Maintaining investigative momentum during an enforced partial cessation of field activity is a manifest priority in North Africa today in order to better shape future investigative strategies.

The Neolithization process along the North African coast and the Sahara have been thoroughly investigated in recent years. Current evidence seems to indicate profound internal variation across Mediterranean Africa, some of it associated with climate-driven environmental change. Such variation includes earlier Holocene aquatic foraging lifestyles along the Nile; primary pastoral mobile practices spreading out of north-east Africa from the 7th -6th millennia BC; a long-lived mosaic of foraging, pastoral and mixed ways of life elsewhere, often evincing a broad multi-spectral exploitation of resources; and, from the 6th millennium BC, confined enclaves of farming that long remained restricted to the Nile and the western Maghreb.

In contrast, the millennia ranging from the beginning of the irreversible climatic deterioration of the Sahara, around 4000/3500 BC, and the onset of the classical period in North Africa still remain *terra incognita*. The evidence everywhere except in the Nile delta declines sharply and recovers only around the period of Phoenician and Greek settlement.

Why does our information reduce so sharply from the 4th millennium BC onwards until the threshold of the colonial Iron Age? To what extent can this really be attributed to aridification in the Mediterranean zone, as undoubtedly holds good for the Sahara, given that the same process elsewhere in the Mediterranean coincides with a burgeoning of Copper and Bronze Age societies? Alternatively, is it a product of the failure to look for the right kinds of material and sites, and of their relative visibility?

We carried out a programme of comprehensive data-gathering and modelling, which included all (a) the existing chronometric evidence for the Holocene Mediterranean Africa; (b) reliable available palaeoenvironmental and climate data; and (c) standardised typological criteria, published information by site on principal cultural traits, plus faunal and botanical remains.

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This allowed us to understand how real the informational dearth from the 4th to early 1st millennium BC really is, and whether it reflects low archaeological visibility and/or prospection versus an absence, or reduction, of past activity during this period.

Mots-Clés: Mediterranean Africa, Late Holocene, Data modeling, GIS, Social dynamics, Bronze Age