
Mesolithic and Neolithic human remains from El Toral III rockshelter (Asturias, Spain): two different funerary cultural behaviors

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Résumé

Data about funerary practices in Mesolithic shell middens and burial caves at the Cantabrian Region (northern Iberia) are relatively common. However, there is a limited knowledge about the burial deposits during the Neolithic in the region. Rescue excavations conducted in 2009 at the rockshelter of El Toral III (Asturias, Spain) produced a number of Mesolithic shell midden units and a funerary structure, probably dated to the Neolithic/Chalcolithic. During the excavation, several human remains were discovered in different archaeological contexts of the site. A Mesolithic burial was represented by human remains recovered in non-disturbed shell midden layers. However, these remains were not found in anatomical articulation. Moreover, a large amount of bones dated to the Late Neolithic were found in several disturbed levels, and also inside of a funerary cist that cuts the Mesolithic levels. Anthropological and taphonomic investigations were carried out to understand the complex funerary deposits at the site. Several quantification units were used to assess the remains, such as the Number of Specimens Identified, Minimum Number of Elements, Minimum Number of Individuals, Fragmentation Rate and Index of Anatomical Preservation. With the aim to estimate the age and sex of the individuals we used different anthropological techniques, such as auricular surface of the ilium and dental wear to determine the age, and the greater sciatic notch to establish the sex. In order to understand the formation of the deposits, we performed an exhaustive taphonomic analysis of the biostratigraphic and diagenetic alterations. In total 310 remains were identified (66 Mesolithic and 244 Neolithic/Chalcolithic). They belonged to a minimum number of five individuals (one Mesolithic and four Neolithic).

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For the Mesolithic individual, the results indicate a primary burial with severe diagenetic modifications, while for the Neolithic the remains indicate a secondary burial in disturbed layers, probably related to the violation of the funerary cist. El Toral III constitutes one of the few archaeological sites in northern Iberia, together with Los Canes and Linatzeta, with human remains from both periods. Apart from the anthropological and taphonomic results presented here, the application of multidisciplinary techniques in progress (stable isotopes and aDNA) will provide accurate information about the health, diet, mobility and genetic relations of these human populations and cultures, revealing continuity or discontinuity, gradual or fast change, acculturation or colonisation process during the Mesolithic to Neolithic transition.

Mots-Clés: Mesolithic, Neolithic, human remains, funerary traditions, Cantabrian Region, Taphonomy