
The Middle Paleolithic open air site with preservation of plant remains of Aranbaltza III and its implications in the understanding of neandertal settlement dynamics in the Northern Iberian Peninsula.

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Résumé

The eastern part of the Cantabrian region is characterized by the presence of several Middle Paleolithic sites, most of them located in caves and rock-shelters (Axlor, Amalda, Arlanpe, Arrillor, Lezetxiki, El Cuco, Ventalapera). The chronology of these sites ranges from ca. MIS6 to MIS3. The ongoing research on some of these sites reveals a high degree of variability in lithic provisioning and subsistence strategies that can be tracked through time (Rios-Garaizar 2017, Rios-Garaizar and García-Moreno 2015). Nevertheless, this vision is biased by the practical absence of open-air sites of this age with good preservation of archaeological materials and spatial relationships (Arrizabalaga et al. 2015).

The open air site of Aranbaltza III (Barrika, Northern Iberian Peninsula) is located near Bilbao, close to the current shoreline, and it is one of the rare examples in the Cantabrian Region of well preserved archaeological record in open air. The site is located in a big archaeological complex where MIS3 Middle Paleolithic (Aranbaltza I), and Chatelperronian (Aranbaltza II) occupations have been also identified (Rios-Garaizar et al. 2012).

The site presents a ca. 4 m deep sequence with MIS3 Middle Paleolithic (Levallois) archaeological units on top, several sterile levels in between, and MIS5-4 archaeosedimentary units in the base. These units are characterized by an incredible good preservation of plant remains, including some wooden tools (Rios-Garaizar et al. under preparation), and many ecofacts. Such incredible preservation is unknown for sites of this age (ca. 90 kyr) below latitude 48. This poses a rare opportunity to obtain insights about coastal landscape exploitation and the use of plant materials by neandertals.

Also, the nature of the archaeological record is very different than the archaeological evidence from other Middle Paleolithic sites in the region, most of them located in caves or rock-shelters and situated far away from the coast. These differences are observed in raw material selection: almost exclusive use of local flint vs combination of local raw materials with imported flint; absence of ramified productions; or the low investment in tool configuration and curation. This opens new ways for investigate the links between technology, landscape, site type and site function.

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Mots-Clés: Middle Paleolithic, Open Air, Plant remains, Wooded Tool, Lithic Technology, Settlement Dynamics