
Population movements towards refuge areas during the Mid-Holocene aridification of the Sahara: a comparative study at a supra-regional scale

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Résumé

In this paper we use the concept of refuge areas for characterizing regions having benefited from population movements between plains and massifs during the last millennia of the Holocene "climatic optimum" of the Sahara. This paper displays results of the research project on refuge areas of the Holocene Sahara (Équipe Ethnologie Préhistorique, UMR 7041, CNRS, France). We present a comparative study on two massifs: the *Dhar* Tichitt-Oualata-Nema in Mauritania and the Gilf el-Kebir in Egypt during the Early and Mid-Holocene periods. These two regions share the common topographical feature of being rocky massifs overhanging sandy plains. Palaeoenvironmental evidence show that they remained attractive places for centuries after the deterioration of the Holocene optimum climatic conditions. A regionally favourable environment was created by the hydrological characteristics ensuing from the interaction between the pluvial maximum and the incised tabular geomorphology. The presence of water resources that were still available in these regions at the time of an increasing aridification in the rest of the Sahara was an attractive feature. Through the study of archaeological evidence and the comparison of the regional records of cumulated radiocarbon dates, we try to highlight population dynamics towards refuge areas during the Mid-Holocene period and then the final diaspora that accompanied the last desertification of the Sahara, in order to better understand how prehistoric groups have coped with fluctuating environmental conditions.

Mots-Clés: Sahara, Holocene, arid environment, desert, palaeoenvironment, refuge area.

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