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# Mesolithic habitat structures at open-air sites in Villena (Alicante, Southeastern Spain): Current investigations and research perspectives

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## Résumé

In the Iberian Mediterranean region the formation of open-air Mesolithic archaeological sites is subjected to the action of different accumulation processes and a variety of taphonomic dynamics, which result in most cases in a very partial preservation of occupation surfaces within broader palimpsest deposits. In this scenario the identification of Mesolithic features represents a unique opportunity to address simultaneously the analysis of specific stratigraphic contexts and the individualization of occupation events.

In this paper we present the state of the art regarding current inter-disciplinary research on habitat features at the open-air Mesolithic sites of Arenal de la Virgen and Casa Corona. Over the past 10 years, our investigations have provided a significant record of Early and Late Mesolithic habitat structures, most of them combustion features, discovered over the course of 3 different phases of fieldwork and post-excavation research. Between 2006-2007, the first excavations at the Arenal de la Virgen site allowed the recognition of a combustion area dated to the Early Mesolithic associated to a lithic scatter and anthropogenic accumulations of land snails. The results obtained marked the directions of subsequent research in the area investigated setting the grounds for the recognition of archaeological and sedimentary features.

Between 2008-2014 rescue excavations conducted at Casa Corona uncovered a multi-component open-air site, with occupational evidences from the Early Mesolithic to the Chacolithic periods. Subsequent post-excavation research consisted on morpho-metric descriptions, the study of archaeological components and the implementation of a radiocarbon dating program, which allowed a preliminary identification of 16 Mesolithic combustion structures.

Finally, during the third phase 2016-2017, new fieldwork undertaken at Casa Corona and Arenal de la Virgen sites in the context of the research project Paleodem (ERC-CoG-2015 Ref. 683018) has considerably expanded the excavated surface and the number of archaeological features. During this phase the implementation of specific excavation and sampling protocols

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has played a key role in our research. A range of geoarchaeological (e.g. stratigraphy, micro-morphology, pedology) and archaeobotanical analyses (e.g. charcoal and seeds) are currently in progress in order to clarify key behavioural and palaeoenvironmental aspects at both sites.

This contribution summarizes the variability of Mesolithic combustion features and related occupation surfaces at both sites on the basis of field descriptions, artefactual evidences, sedimentary composition and radiocarbon dating. Data currently available allow us to provide a preliminary characterization of site structure and activity areas during the Early Holocene in the investigated area.

**Mots-Clés:** Mesolithic, open, air sites, combustion structures, Iberian Peninsula