
The Neolithization processes of the Caucasus: new archaeological and environmental evidence from Nakhchivan (Azerbaijan)

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Résumé

The formation of the " Neolithic way of life " (productive economy) started fairly late in the Caucasus (*ca.* 6200 BCE), especially when this phenomenon is compared with similar developments in the nearby Fertile Crescent, where ample evidence of agriculture and herding dating back to the 9th millennium BCE has been brought to light. Interestingly enough, the available data suggests that both agricultural practices and herding appeared in the Caucasus as a ready-to-use package, since no traces of an economic transition or a genesis have been recognized on the sites that have so far been excavated.

This fact, together with other clues collected in the South Caucasus, especially in the Araxes basin, suggests that the development of new subsistence strategies in the highlands may have been prompted by the migrations of human groups from the Fertile Crescent, in particular from its Syro-Levantine component (Cucchi *et al.* 2013).

In this respect, the fact that developing Neolithic practices in the South Caucasus are seemingly correlated with a significant environmental change, which occurred between 7 and 6 000 cal. BC (the 8.2 ka cal BP event) is of particular interest. This change may be due to a possible shift in the rain-seasonality; at all events, it resulted in the marked expansion of the vegetation cover, especially forests, as suggested by the evidence recently collected from southern Georgia (Messenger *et al.* 2013; 2017; Joannin *et al.*, 2014).

Whatever the causes of the forest expansion, the question that leaps to mind is whether this change had an impact on the migration of Neolithic groups from the South towards the Caucasus. This issue will be examined in this paper by focusing on the archaeological and paleoenvironmental data recently retrieved from the Neolithic site of K'ultepe I in Nakhchivan, and from its hinterland in the Araxes basin.

Mots-Clés: Neolithic, Caucasus, migrations, vegetation

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