

The Late Iron Age along the Channel : palaeogenetic study of the Urville-Nacqueville necropolis

CE. FISCHER^a, A. LEFORT^b, MH. PEMONGE^a, C. COUTURE-VESCHAMBRE^a, S. ROTTIER^a, MF. DEGUILLLOUX^a

^aUniversité de Bordeaux, UMR 5199-PACEA

^bUniversité de Bourgogne (Dijon), UMR 5594-ArTeHiS

Recent advances in methods in archaeology and biological anthropology permit to document new aspects of past societies. Thus, the palaeogenetic/palaeogenomic approach, applied to ancient human communities, allow to specify the origin of the group, to question the mobility of individuals, or to specify the matrimonial and kinship systems of the targeted communities.

This palaeogenetic approach was carried out on La Tène necropolis of Urville-Nacqueville (Manche, II^e-I^{er} century BC). This site, located in the Cotentin, is interpreted as a commercial and craft centre (Lefort et al., 2015) and is therefore a prime site for the study of trans-Manche exchanges during the Iron Age.

The analyses targeted 45 individuals and allowed to characterize the first mitochondrial pool of a community of the Iron Age in France. On the one hand, results obtained demonstrate a genetic continuity between the European Bronze age groups, impacted by migrations originating from the Steppes of Western Asia (Allentoft et al., 2015 ; Haak et al., 2015), and the Urville-Nacqueville community. On the other hand, we identify significant genetic exchanges with groups from Great Britain. These results can be correlated with archaeological data pointing out the existence of a cultural complex (“Atlantic complex” and, more precisely, a “Manche-Mer du Nord complex” MMN), present since the Bronze Age and characterized by the sharing of artefacts and social practices (Marcigny et Talon, 2009). The genetic data acquired allow us to propose that cultural exchanges within this MMN complex must have been contemporaneous with notable gene flow. Cross-Channel trade seems to decline between the 1st and 2nd Iron Age (Milcent, 2006) the Atlantic and MMN complex of the Bronze Age gradually giving way to the Latenian culture (Godard, 2013). Our data tend to show that this cultural evolution was not linked to a major transformation of the maternal pool of the human groups concerned. Finally, the data allow us to observe a spatial structuration of the necropolis according to the individuals’ maternal lineages. Notably, the correlation pointed out between maternal lineages and the deposit of the deceased inside or outside an enclosure suggests that special selection regulated the access to the enclosure.

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