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Le Capsien de Hergla (Tunisie): culture, environnement et économie

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BOOK REVIEW

Le Capsien de Hergla (Tunisie): culture, environnement et économie, edited by Simone Mulazzani. Frankfurt, Africa Magna Verlag, Reports in African Archaeology, 2013, 436 pp., €89.80/\$135 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-937248-36-3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0067270X.2014.948308>

The early to mid-Holocene culture history of northern Africa, together with the development of the Neolithic of the central and western Mediterranean and related intercontinental contacts, is a focus of much contemporary archaeological research. The Upper Capsian site of SHM-1 (Hergla, Tunisia), located at the edge of the salt flat (*sebkha*) of Halk el Menjel, 5 km from the east coast of Tunisia and 20 km north of Sousse, is a key site for this research. First mentioned in 1954 by E.G. Gobet, initial excavations were carried out by M. Harbi-Riahi and J. Zoughlami between 1969 and 1971. The book under review provides the results of fieldwork between 2002 and 2007 undertaken collaboratively by the Institut National du Patrimoine de Tunis (INP), the Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente di Roma (IsIAO) and the Dipartimento di Archeologia dell’Università di Bologna (DAUNIBO) under the direction of R. Boussoffara, S. Mulazzani and M. Tosi.

This volume is particularly important for several reasons. As David Lubell states in the preface, it is the first comprehensive report on a Capsian site in nearly forty years. In addition to the fact that the site is located outside the previously assumed geographic range of the Capsian, the excavation and analysis of this open-air (*rammadiya*) site, a previously neglected site type, substantially broadens our knowledge of this Epipalaeolithic culture. Furthermore, it is also encouraging to witness, during these fraught times, a successful collaboration between European and North African researchers. Finally, the impressive corpus of methods employed in the research establishes new standards for North African archaeology. The list of methods includes not only routine stratigraphic and sedimentological investigations, including geochemistry and micromorphology, but also the study of the provenience of the raw materials of all the artefact categories by means of X-ray fluorescence and geochemical analysis. Moreover, stable isotope analysis of human and fish bone was also carried out. As a field archaeologist working in North Africa, I am fully aware of the logistical challenges of working in this area, but one should not forget the time-consuming nature of proper sampling for all the analyses, as well as the effort required to integrate and interpret the results obtained. Thus, the editor and his team must be complimented for successfully publishing this research so expeditiously.

One of the most remarkable results is the discovery that *rammadiya* sites, like SHM-1, which were previously considered to be unstructured or heavily disturbed archaeological deposits, can still provide stratigraphic information if properly excavated. Thanks to the application of appropriate methods, such as the separation of natural layers and the use of GIS, undisturbed deposits were detected and seven occupation levels defined. Profiles and sections are commendably presented, although sometimes I would have liked to have seen

an illustration combining stratigraphic information and absolute ages in order to understand more readily the complex presentation of all the detailed studies that followed.

While the absolute dates for the site are stratigraphically consistent, no information is presented on which calibration tables and methods were employed. A graphic illustration of the calibrated ages, such as a cumulative probability plot, would also have rounded off this part of the publication. Nevertheless, the use of radiocarbon ages is correct and uniform except for a few exceptions where ages are not cited (p. 46, 47) or where uncalibrated ages are displayed as “Calage” (p. 39, Fig. 4.7).

One remarkable discovery is the appearance of early impressed pottery within the upper three layers of the deposit. The first appearance of pottery in the North African Mediterranean region is controversial. Many publications show a spread of Mediterranean impressed pottery along the North African coast, although no well-documented and well-dated assemblages are as yet known between Tunisia and the area of Oran in western Algeria. In this regard, the ceramic assemblage from SHM-1 is important. Ceramic assemblages from Morocco dating to older than the middle of the sixth millennium BC, such as those from Kaf That el Ghar and Hassi Ouenzga, should be rejected; their age determination in the seventh millennium BC is based on a misinterpretation of stratigraphy. The distribution of early pottery in northern Morocco is strongly connected to the Neolithisation process of the western Mediterranean as a whole, which on the Iberian Peninsula did not start before 5600 BC. The widespread phenomenon of regionalisation of pottery decoration points to involvement by local forager groups; however, evidence of an independent invention of pottery in a Mediterranean Epipalaeolithic context is still missing.

In the case of SHM-1 local pottery production is indeed evident and a general affiliation to later sites in the area, such as Kef el Agab, Redeyef or Grotte Capéletti, is attested. Pottery appears from Level 5 onwards, dated to the second half of the seventh millennium BC. Mulazzani (p. 282) interprets this early appearance as resulting from taphonomic processes, namely a post-depositional infiltration from higher parts of the deposit. However, no proper Neolithic layers are present at SHM-1 and other scenarios are plausible. Geochemical analyses demonstrate that a small part of the lithic assemblage from SHM-1 is made on obsidian from the Italian island of Pantelleria, 60 km east of the Tunisian coast (p. 243). These obsidian artefacts derive from the same levels (5-7) as the pottery fragments. Obsidian from Pantelleria also appears in the Early Neolithic levels of Grotta dell’Uzzo in Sicily, where the transition to the Neolithic starts in the first half of the seventh millennium BC. Thus, contacts to Sicily via Pantelleria are evident for the second half of the seventh millennium BC and so it can be concluded that knowledge of pottery production may have reached the Mediterranean coast of Tunisia several centuries earlier than it reached the Moroccan coast. The high quality flint and fine limestone from SHM-1 came from the hinterland west of the site. Knowledge of pottery making may have entered the Capsian core area through these contacts. In this sense, coastal sites could be considered as the starting point of pottery production within the eastern Maghreb, reinforcing the particular importance of SHM-1, though further research is, of course, needed to confirm this.

The appearance of pottery poses the question of Neolithisation in general, usually defined by the presence of food production. At SHM-1 this question was answered with the help of pollen analysis and the study of faunal remains, including fish bones and marine and terrestrial molluscs. No remains of domesticated species were found. Instead, a hunter-gatherer-fisher economy exploiting a broad spectrum of wild terrestrial and marine resources is evident. However, results from stable isotope analysis of human and animal bones appear to contradict in part the studies of the faunal remains. While isotope

analyses emphasise the use of terrestrial resources and show little evidence of food from the nearby lagoon, the faunal data include numerous remains of brackish fish species. All the analyses coalesce in developing a picture of a hunter-gatherer society with a substantial marine component to the diet.

A final remarkable feature of the volume is the holistic approach embraced in the study of all the archaeological material. While the reconstruction of *chaînes opératoires* has become a standard procedure in studying lithic assemblages, this promising method is still rarely used in the analysis of other artefact categories. Here, this approach is also employed in the study of ostrich eggshell artefacts and especially in the study of the production of bone tools, such as points and cutting tools. To the best of my knowledge this is the first application of the *chaîne opératoire* approach to bone tool assemblages of the North African Epipalaeolithic and it has yielded very interesting insights.

In summary, this volume represents a highly commendable archaeological excavation report. The uniform structure of all the contributions, including trilingual abstracts and informative graphics, enables the reader to comprehend the complex and comprehensive results of the project. This volume represents a milestone in North African archaeology and should be part of every archaeological library.

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