
The earliest migration of *Homo sapiens* in southern Europe: an ERC grant to understand the biocultural processes that define our uniqueness

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Résumé

Anatomically modern humans (AMHs) radiated out of Africa into the rest of the world around 60,000-50,000 years ago, reaching Europe potentially around 45,000 calendar years before present (cal BP). The timing and pattern of the biological and cultural shifts that occurred in Europe around 50,000 to 35,000 cal BP, however, are hotly debated and are considered to be among the most important questions in paleoanthropology. Undoubtedly, during this period Neandertals were replaced by AMHs and various technocomplexes appeared and replaced pre-existing Mousterian cultures.

The interpretation of these new technocomplexes (called ‘transitional’/Early Upper Paleolithic cultures) influences our understanding of evolutionary issues, including the exact timing of arrival of anatomically modern humans in Europe, their potential interactions with Neandertals, Neandertal’s cognitive abilities and the reasons for their extinction. There exists doubt about the makers of these technocomplexes because of 1) the paucity of well-preserved human remains dated to the transitional period, 2) the lack of large-scale comparison of the results and 3) the limited number of accurate, well-documented/well-dated excavations.

Within this context, new evidence places Italy as a keystone region in answering questions surrounding this transition due to its geographic position, ecological variability, and the key archaeological sites representing Middle-to-Upper Paleolithic cultures. Moreover,

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several teeth retrieved from Italian archaeological sites, associated with both Uluzzian and Protoaurignacian cultures, were pivotal for stimulating novel debates about the biological shift that occurred in Western Europe around 45,000-35,000 years ago. Remarkably, Italy has largely been absent in the research.

The recently obtained ERC Consolidator Grant 2016 (n. 724046 - SUCCESS) tackles this issue. It aims to understand, more precisely, when AMHs arrived in Southern Europe, the biocultural processes that favoured their successful adaptation and the final cause(s) of Neandertal extinction.

Mots-Clés: Mousterian, Uluzzian, Modern human, Neandertal, Italy