

## The Early Neolithic in Northern Iberia

Lydia Zapata  
Alfonso Alday

Dpto. Geografía, Prehistoria y Arqueología. University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU).  
F. Tomás y Valiente s/n. 01006 Vitoria-gasteiz.  
E-mail: [lydia.zapata@ehu.es](mailto:lydia.zapata@ehu.es)

The spread of the Neolithic and farming is documented in different regions of the Iberian Peninsula from at least c 5500-5200 cal. BC (Zapata *et al.*, 2004). The northern peninsula is not an area where research on the Neolithic has a long tradition but many new data are now available.

The starting point for the Neolithic in three northern areas (Basque-Cantabrian coast, Upper Ebro Valley and Ambrona) is different. In fact, they summarize some of the main models that have been put forward for the adoption of the Neolithic in Europe, from colonization to indigenous adoption: 1) The Basque-Cantabrian coast has much research on the Palaeolithic but little on the Mesolithic and Neolithic. Atlantic territories in Iberia have been considered marginal and isolated. A common assumption has been the late adoption of agriculture by local hunter-gatherers. The chronology of the transition is starting to be updated with new research. 2) The Upper and Middle Ebro Valley shows an intensive Mesolithic occupation where ideas and materials circulated very quickly. Mesolithic sites show a dense and intensive exploitation of the territory. Typical sites are small rock-shelters with very long occupations, such as the recently excavated rock-shelter of Atxoste ([Figure 1](#)). Neolithic innovations were adopted by this demographic base. 3) The Neolithic of Ambrona, however, seems to be the first Holocene occupation of that area in what seems to be a real colonization by early farmers (Rojo-Guerra *et al.*, 2006).

Although there is very little information on this subject, plant foods may have been an important component of Mesolithic diets. Rosaceae pomes and hazelnuts have been recovered at the site of Aizpea in the Western Pyrenees and palaeodietary information on the only skeleton preserved shows that diet depended more heavily on the consumption of carbohydrates rather than animal protein (Zapata *et al.*, 2002).

AMS dating of cereals in Iberia is starting to provide a better chronological framework for the origins of agriculture. The first dates cluster in the central and second part of the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, although they are later for the northern Atlantic coast. This delay in the north might be a result of current research although some have proposed a resistance to the adoption of agriculture in an Ertebølle-like scenario. Neolithic agriculture in Iberia shows a high diversity of cereals (hulled and free-threshing wheat and barley) and legumes (pea, lentil, faba bean, vetches and

grass peas). Other crops are linseed and the possible local domestication of opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*). However, there are exceptions like sites in Ambrona and Los Cascajos, with only hulled wheats (Peña-Chocarro, Zapata, García Gazólaz *et al.*, 2005; Stika, 2005).

In the Ebro Valley and on the Basque coast there are different types of contemporary sites which are very close in space. They seem to respond to activities that complement each other, some of them more related to farming, and others to hunting and gathering.

## References

- Alday, A. 2005. The transition between the last Hunter-Gatherers and the First Farmers in Southwestern Europe: the basque perspective. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 61 (4): 469-494.
- Alday, A. 2002. Las unidades industriales mesolíticas en la alta-Media Cuenca del Ebro. *Complutum* 13: 19-50.
- Peña-Chocarro, L., Zapata, L., García Gazólaz, J., González Morales, M., Sesma, J. and Straus, L. 2005. The spread of agriculture in Northern Iberia. New archaeobotanical data from El Mirón cave (Cantabria) and the open-air site of Los Cascajos (Navarra). *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 14 (4): 268-278.
- Rojo-Guerra, M., Kunst, M., Garrido Pena, R. and García Martínez de Lagrán, I. 2005. La neolitización de la Meseta Norte a la luz del C-14: análisis de 47 dataciones absolutas inéditas de dos yacimientos domésticos del Valle de Ambrona, Soria, España. *Archivo de Prehistoria Levantina XXVI*: 39-62.
- Stika, H.-P. 2005. Early Neolithic agriculture in Ambrona, provincia Soria, central Spain. *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 14: 189-197.
- Zapata, L., Cava, A., Iriarte, M.J., Baraybar, J.P. and De la Rúa, C. 2002. Mesolithic plant use in the Western Pyrenees: implications for vegetation change, use of wood and human diet. In S.L.R. Mason y J.G. Hather (eds.) *Hunter-Gatherer Archaeobotany. Perspectives from the northern temperate zone*, pp. 96-107. Institute of Archaeology, University C. London, London.

Zapata, L., Peña-Chocarro, L., Pérez Jordá, G. y Stika, H.P. 2004. Early Neolithic Agriculture in the Iberian Peninsula. *Journal of World Prehistory* 18 (4): 285-326.

**FIGURE 1**

Atxoste rock-shelter (Basque Country, northern Iberia), with a long sequence from the end of the Upper Palaeolithic to the Chalcolithic. Excavation: Alfonso Alday.

# Corte estratigráfico occidental de Aixoste

Las referencias radiocromológicas no pertenecen necesariamente a este perfil, pero sí califican a los estratos con los que se emparejan

