The Southern French Alps Landscape Project

Settlement and landscape dynamics in the high altitude zone of the southern French Alps

Kevin WALSH*, Florence MOCCI**, Suzi RICHER* and Brigitte TALON***

This alpine archaeological project has been running since 1998 and aims to investigate the history and archaeology of human activity in the southern French Alps. Prospection, excavation and environmental research have allowed us to identify ten phases of activity from the Mesolithic through to the post-medieval period. However, three major phases of activity dominate the archaeological record: the end of the Neolithic, the Bronze Age and the Medieval period. Whilst hunting and mining are important activities, it is clear that pastoral activities have been foremost since the Bronze Age. It is rare for such a chronological range of archaeological sites to be studied at this altitude (between 2000 and 2400m above sea level (asl)), and we hope to explain the various phases of settlement expansion and contraction and the associated evolution of this previously unstudied alpine environment.

One of the main observations from our high altitude study in the Ecrins is that climate does not seem to have a direct influence on the ebb and flow of settlement. It is hoped that by combining the extensive archaeological data with the pollen record, a fuller picture will be gained of the "human-environment" relationship in high-altitude areas over time.

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