Revisiting Rolling stones: The procurement of non-local goods in the Epipaleolithic of the Near East

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ABSTRACT
At the end of the Pleistocene, the Near Eastern Epipaleolithic chrono-cultural complex experienced profound cultural changes. Among these, the acquisition of exotic goods becomes one of the hallmarks of the Late Epipaleolithic/Natu
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an. Research conducted in recent decades has made it possible to better understand this phenomenon. These studies concerned the movement of materials such as shells, basalt, obsidian, ochre, colored stones, as well as chert, allowing us to better define the nature of the materials in question and to propose a possible geographical origin. The research, most notably the archeometric analyses, also enabled us to outline an evolution of these practices from the late Middle Paleolithic to the Epipaleolithic. The Geometric Kebaran-Natu
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an complex witnessed much more complex strategies in the acquisition of exotic raw materials and finished products. These practices have been interpreted as the result of more intense contact between groups and long-distance exchanges. The Levantine Epipaleolithic lends itself to further reflections in the light of recent research on transegalitarian societies of hunter-gatherers. Various hypotheses are thus put forward to better understand the role played by the acquisition and exchange of exotic materials within the diverse communities of the Late Epipaleolithic in the Southern Levant. The end of the Pleistocene could be split into two worlds: a pre-Middle Epipaleolithic world with exclusively shell exchange and a Middle-Late Epipaleolithic world with intensive procurement/exchange of diverse exotic goods. These worlds would be associated with different ontologies and cosmological views. These worlds would notably translate into changes of the nature and quantity of the items exchanged, from balanced reciprocity (“A = A”) to unbalanced exchange (“A = B”). Moreover, the production and intensive movement of exotic items turned into prestige goods in the Late Epipaleolithic might provide an opportunity and be the subject of manipulation by some individuals in order to rise to a higher status.

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1. Introduction

Until the early 1990s, shells dated to the Late Upper Paleolithic and the Epipaleolithic were considered the only category of material that seemed to be subjected to ubiquitous and long-distance transport, mainly from the Mediterranean and the Red Seas (D. Bar-Yosef, 1989, 1991; Goring-Morris, 1989; Reese, 1982, 1991). Since then, archaeological research has documented that the use of shells as body ornaments dates back to the Early Upper Paleolithic, at Uçagızlı Cave (Kuhn et al., 2001), or even the Middle Paleolithic at Skhul (Vanhaeren et al., 2006) (See Fig. 1 for all sites mentioned in the text).

Commencing in the 1990s, the el-Wad research project, led by Mina Weinstein-Evron, contributed the most to renew our knowledge on the subject of the transport of exotic materials in the Epipaleolithic. At the time, the prevailing view was that the raw materials exploited by a prehistoric group (such as the Natufians) were of local origin when they were present in the vicinity of a basecamp. Contrary to this view, Mina Weinstein-Evron sought to investigate this hypothesis. Thus, she set up a multidisciplinary team to study the issues of exploitation of the natural environment and the landscape and territory among the Natufians of el-Wad. One of the first applications of this investigation concerned basalt (Fig. 2). Some geologists (Barbu Lang, Shimon Ilani) collaborated with her to analyze a selection of grinding stones. As we will further describe below, they demonstrated that the origin of the samples analyzed was non-local, located beyond the Golan Heights, probably in the basaltic regions of Syria or Jordan (Fig. 3) (Weinstein-Evron, 1998; Weinstein-Evron et al., 1995). In a second phase, this
The team extended its investigations to other Natufian sites in the region (i.e. Hayonim and 'Eynan). The results were similar to those previously documented at el-Wad and confirmed the exogenous origin of basaltic materials found at Natufian sites in Northern Israel (Weinstein-Evron et al., 1999). This research also took into account some Geometric Kebaran artefacts from Neve David (Kaufman, 1989). The analyses produced results similar to those of el-Wad, confirming the interpretation of imported non-local materials. Thus we may wonder whether such practices could not date back to just before the Natufian, in some Middle Epipaleolithic societal contexts (Kaufman, 1992). These same researchers also conducted similar analyses on ochre remains from el-Wad. These pigments were derived from geological veins less than 10 km from the site on Mount Carmel (Weinstein-Evron, 1998; Weinstein-Evron and Ilani, 1994). Ohad Zackheim subsequently conducted further studies on ochre from the same site and extended the project to samples from Hayonim Cave and 'Eynan (Zackheim, 1997; Zackheim et al., 1999). While ochre from el-Wad and 'Eynan appeared to originate from local sources, some samples from Hayonim had an origin several hundred kilometers away.

These results substantially revised our knowledge of the practices of mineral resources procurement and exploitation in the Natufian. Yet Mina Weinstein-Evron and Daniel Kaufman did not stop there. They decided to collaborate with an eminent...
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