

The Early Mesolithic in Northern Italy and Southern France

**An investigation into Sauveterrian
lithic technical systems**

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Access Archaeology





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Foreword

This work has two main merits. First, it is one of the few comprehensive studies on the Mesolithic of Southwestern Europe issued in the latest years and embracing a wide territory such as the one included between Southern France and Northern Italy. Second, although being exclusively focused on one category of finds, i.e. lithic assemblages, it approaches the subject of Mesolithic cultures from a wide techno-economical perspective.

As stated by the Author, the origin of the topic addressed by this book - i.e. verifying the French *Sauveterrien*-Italian *Sauveterriano* association according to a broad technological approach - derives from the idea of one of us (N. Valdeyron) who already in the 1990s tried to challenge the hypothesis of a large Sauveterrian culture through a typological approach. Following a long-term scientific relationship between N. Valdeyron and F. Fontana, both involved in the study of the *Sauveterrien* and *Sauveterriano* since rather long times in their respective countries, this issue was then proposed – several years later - to D. Visentin as a subject for his PhD that was carried out in co-tutorship between the Universities of Ferrara and Toulouse Jean Jaurès between 2014 and 2017. M. Peresani and S. Philibert were also co-tutors, the first one as director of research in two of the sites analyzed in this thesis and the second one as supervisor for the aspects concerning traceology. The good results reached in Davide's work derive not only from his keenness and fine level of scientific inclination in approaching archaeological subjects but also from his ability to involve in his project other colleagues through constructive discussions on the different aspects of this research.

The work analyses a wide set of assemblages from two regions of Italy (the Venetian and the Emilian areas) and two of France (Nouvelle-Aquitaine et Occitanie) which include open-air, rock-shelter and cave sites and compose a meaningful dataset, representing a wide variety of geographic environments. Such selection allows for the first time exploring the richness of the *Sauveterrien/Sauveterriano* and appreciating its variability through time and space.

Each site is presented within its regional context and each assemblage is analyzed throughout its whole *chaîne opératoire*: from raw materials provisioning and the reduction/transformation sequences to the identification of micro-wear traces. Although the latter aspect could not be developed in deepness, due to the abundance of some of the considered assemblages, the samples selected for analysis in each site and the good results obtained yielded an articulated picture of the *Sauveterrien/Sauveterriano* phenomenon, reflecting the complexity

of the regional adaptation systems of the last hunter-gatherers of Northern Italy and Southern France behind the apparent simplicity of their technical systems. Moreover it has shown that besides some general shared features, the Early Mesolithic groups referred to as Sauveterrian were able to satisfy the same needs by adapting their *chaînes opératoires* to raw materials characterized by different features and qualities.

This book contains several other interesting points. Without willing to anticipate anyway the final considerations of the Author at least two further aspects are worth to mention: the development of a discussion on the possible relationship of the French *Sauveterrien* with the Beuronian and the evaluation of the chronological parameter as a further variable, overlapping the geographical one, which reveals the complexity of the large Sauveterrian phenomenon. From this viewpoint, in his final synthesis the Author identifies a series of specificities that distinguish the early (Preboreal) from the late (Boreal) Sauveterrian in the four main analyzed areas.

In conclusion this work not only increases our knowledge on the Early Mesolithic of Southern France and North-Eastern Italy but it also pulls us to develop further studies based on the same integrated technological approach, as one of the future challenges of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic research.

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Introduction

Aim of the work

The Sauveterrian represents one of the main cultural aspects of the Early Mesolithic in Europe. Its recognition in southern France by Coulonges (1928) dates back to the end of the 1920s. During the 1970s similar assemblages were identified in north-eastern Italy (Adige Valley) by Broglio (1971). This evidence, as well as that belonging to the numerous other sites that were investigated in the following years allowed advancing the hypothesis of the existence of a large cultural entity, the Sauveterrian, that developed in southern France and northern Italy during the first part of the Holocene (Kozłowski 1976; Broglio 1980; Barbaza et al. 1991). The presumed uniformity of this complex was based, in particular, on the presence in both regions of needle-like backed points and triangular microliths. This association was later questioned by Valdeyron (1994, 2008a) that, still on a typological grounds, concluded that the differences between the French and Italian assemblages were too important to allow a formal unification.

Following this line of research, the present work was aimed at questioning and verifying the French *Sauveterrien* - Italian *Sauveterriano* association according to a broad technological approach applied to the lithic assemblages of 8 French and Italian reference sites. The adopted methodology aimed at reconstructing the reduction sequences, from the procurement of lithic raw materials to the use and discard of tools. Different analytical techniques were thus combined in order to understand and characterize the Sauveterrian assemblages from different, complementary viewpoints. More specifically the study aimed at reconstructing:

- the raw material procurement strategies with a particular focus on the morphology and quality of collected lithic raw materials in order to assess their possible influence on reduction schemes. This analysis was mostly carried out thanks to the contribution of specialists of the sector;
- the objectives of the production and reduction schemes both as regards unretouched and retouched blanks. This allowed identifying how the different rocks were exploited and comparing the technical knowledge (or preferences) attested by the studied assemblages;
- the modalities in which tools and microliths functioned, in order to assess the relationship between morpho-typological features and use and infer

the functional status of the assemblages. This type of analysis was carried out only for some selected sites (cf. chapter 3).

Besides, while evaluating the uniformity of the Sauveterrian complex in its central area of diffusion, it was also possible (or better necessary) to compare it with the neighbouring cultural groups, thus investigating the very nature of western European Early Mesolithic.

Structure

The work was structured with an introductory part (I) aimed at presenting the geographical and chrono-cultural setting of the investigated area as well as the methodology applied. Chapter 2, in particular, was meant to illustrate the main evidence attributed to the Sauveterrian by highlighting the most relevant peculiarities connected to the chronology and position of the known settlements. In order to contextualize this evidence, brief and synthetic descriptions of the cultural groups that preceded the Sauveterrian in southern France and northern Italy as well as of contemporaneous neighbouring groups were included.

In the second part (II) the results of the analyses of the single sites and assemblages were reported. As long as the consistency of the evidence and of obtained data allowed it, a similar structure was adopted for all the chapters. Generally in this part a mostly descriptive approach was maintained.

Then follows the third and final part of the manuscript (III). In the discussion chapter data from the single studied sites were compared one another and with available bibliographic references, trying to highlight the differences and similarities that characterize the Early Mesolithic of the studied region. In the final chapter this evidence was contextualized in the scenario of western European Early Mesolithic trying to interpret the nature of the main identified processes. It was thus possible to advance some hypotheses on the main features characterizing the so-called "Sauveterrian" and discuss its variability across time and space as well as its identity as a uniform cultural complex.