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Marine resources on medieval archaeological sites in northwestern France: where are the seashells ?

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This paper is an abstract of the French version of “L’exploitation des ressources marines par les populations médiévales: un premier bilan des coquillages découverts en contexte archéologique entre Manche et Garonne”, *Revue d’histoire maritime*, 21, 2015, pp. 367-387.

Introduction

As we have been witnessing for several years now an increased interest for food history, new disciplines have

developed to study what is contained in the ground. Among those, archaeomalacology is unfortunately under-exploited, especially for historic periods. Unfortunately indeed, since written sources are laconic about the exploitation of marine molluscs. Archaeological data such as the weight of invertebrates amongst the marine products exploited by medieval human populations, therefore, are privileged means of discussion. With this aim in mind, an inventory has been conducted to monitor the presence of seashells and crustaceans on medieval archaeological sites in France, from the Breton coast of the Channel to the Garonne's estuary. It is part of a doctoral thesis (still in preparation), conducted by L. Le Goff*.

Methodology

This inventory has been initiated by consulting monographs and, more importantly, archaeological journals which were covering the geographical and chronological areas, namely the Breton coast of the Channel and the northern Atlantic French coast, from the 5th to the 15th century. These journals were local (*Revue Archéologique de l'Ouest*, *Bulletin de l'Association Manche Atlantique pour la Recherche Archéologique dans les Îles*, etc.) or national (*Gallia*, for example). This research produced little results. The few mentions of seashells in medieval sites were mostly referring to funeral contexts. The marine invertebrates in food waste were consequently invisible.

To address these gaps, the inventory eventually relied on the systematic consultation of grey literature available in regional services of archaeology. All excavations and survey reports referring to medieval contexts have been examined, mostly on paper, accumulating to a total of about 2000 reports.

Seashells have indeed been exploited during Middle Ages...

... with geographical variations

A total of 166 archaeological sites on which marine invertebrates were discovered have been monitored. Exploitation of seashells during Middle Ages has indeed occurred, and not necessarily in a limited scale. Firstly, the location of these sites highlighted strong geographical disparities (Fig. 1). The department of Charente-Maritime in itself concentrates 84 sites, compared with 3 in Charente, 19 in Vendée, 18 in Loire-Atlantique, 7 in Maine-et-Loire, 9 in Côtes-d'Armor, 7 in Finistère, 5 in Ille-

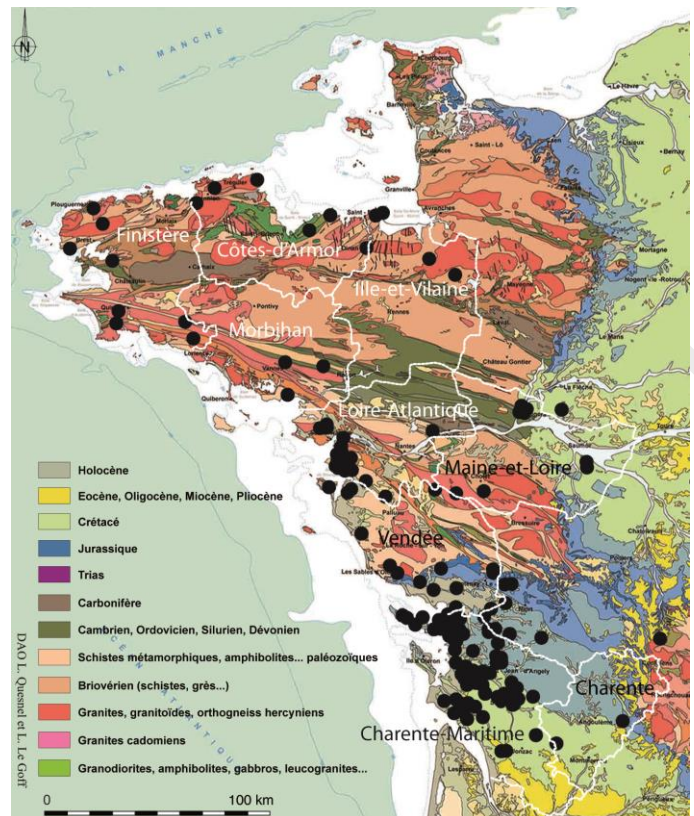


Fig. 1. Inventory of medieval archaeological sites, where malacological remains have been monitored.

et-Vilaine and 5 in Morbihan. One might wonder whether human populations from Charente-Maritime's department were much keener on seashells than in other areas. The most obvious explanation lies within the nature of the soil. The geological map displays the limit between the Armorican Massif and the Aquitaine basin, which coincides exactly with the limit observed within the density of sites. The acidic soils in the Armorican Massif may have caused a more severe degradation of seashells, if not their complete disintegration, while the calcareous soils in the Aquitaine basin may have furthered their conservation.

However, geology might not be the only factor. A great variability in the density of medieval archeological sites has been observed as well: 3369 in Brittany, 5203 in Pays de la Loire, 6321 in Poitou-Charentes. It could be linked with the history of the discipline. Archaeology hasn't developed everywhere in the same way: in Brittany for example, research have mostly concerned megaliths at first. Besides, the personal interest of archaeologists and volunteers have surely played a role in this heterogeneous distribution of seashells deposits in Middle Ages. For instance, the inventory map displays a little area south of the Loire which seems to concentrate several waste dumps containing marine invertebrates, even though it stills lies on magmatic basement, which is not

* L. Le Goff, *Exploitation des invertébrés marins le long de la côte atlantique française au Moyen Âge: de l'alimentation à l'environnement*. University of Rennes 2, in process

propitious for shells conservation. These particular sites have all been reported by the same archaeologist: Michel Tessier, who studied this area as part of his doctoral thesis (Tessier, 1980). In conclusion, it is likely that several factors, both natural and anthropogenic, have combined to result in these disparities.

... only by littoral populations ?

Beyond these first observations, the inventory highlighted other tendencies about the exploitation of molluscs. Most of archaeological sites with seashells remains are located in immediate proximity with the coastline. In this case, temptation is great to conclude that only littoral populations are consuming marine invertebrates. Although they were indubitably regular consumers, it would be imprudent to assume that inland populations were not consumers as well. In fact, this inventory is intrinsically linked to the discovery of *shells*, and we have proofs – archaeological and textual – that the actual meat didn't necessarily travel within its shell. There are indeed gigantic accumulations of oyster shells on the French Atlantic coast, such as those in Saint-Michel-en-L'Herm (Fig. 2) (Gruet and Prigent, 1986).

After many years of debate, researchers have finally agreed that these accumulations were the results of human activity: a few tools and some coins have been discovered within, and numerous oysters valves were displaying marks related to their opening. Such an enormous amount of shells – their countenance has been estimated up to several billions – reflects doubtlessly of a nearly industrial exploitation of oyster beds. Unfortunately, we know no mention of this kind of exploitation in medieval written sources. A few administrative documents from the modern period mention the way shellfish, and oysters in particular, can be transported and sold, including the possibility of removing the flesh: according to the commissioner N. de La Mare, author of *Traité de la police* in 1719 (de La Mare, 1719), it can be transported unaltered or in a marinade. These practices may have concerned other species too. Another waste dump has been discovered at Saint-Brévin (Loire-Atlantique) (Tessier, 1984); its volume has been estimated to 25 m³, thus containing approximately 1,140,000 mussels and 36,000 peppery furrow shells, with a few animal bone fragments. Such an accumulation does *a priori* not coincide with domestic consummation. In these cases, the archaeological track stops on the coastline, even if the flesh continues its way to inland territories.

Archaeomalacological remains have nevertheless been observed in some inland sites. It is worthwhile to note

* We kept here vernacular names, as they were used by archaeologists.

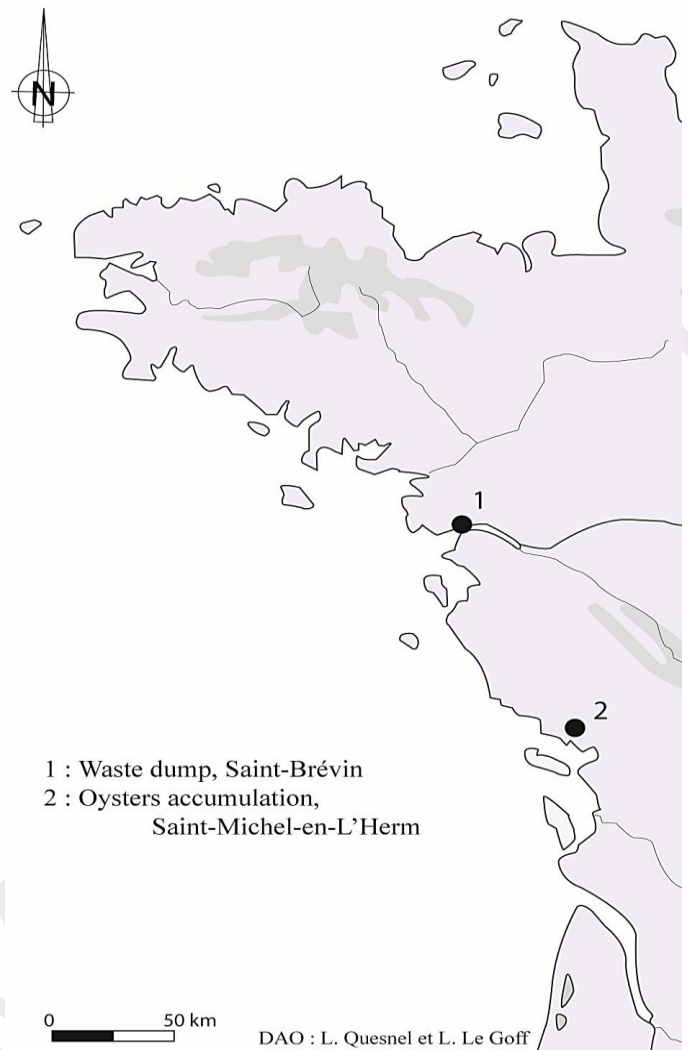


Fig. 2. Localisation of the sites cited in this paper.

that almost all of those have privileged social standing (abbey, castle essentially but urban contexts also): wealthy populations were probably the ones importing the seashells, being able to afford transportation from the coastline. In addition, those inland sites were predominantly settled in immediate proximity with a watercourse, thus indicating conveyance by waterways.

... for various purposes

A vast majority of seashells remains are admittedly food waste, essentially composed of oysters and mussels*. These two species are also the most frequently cited in medieval cookbooks. There seems to be a few regional tendencies as well, such as the recurrence of limpets in Brittany and of variegated scallops in Poitou-Charentes. These observations can although be biased: some species can be hard to determine as a non-specialist, hence a possible under-estimation. In addition, excavation and sampling methods have a great influence on archaeomalacological results: without sieving, risks are high to

cause major underestimation of the presence of fragile species, such as the mussel *Mytilus edulis* (Linnaeus, 1758) or the peppery furrow shell *Scrobicularia plana* (da Costa, 1778).

Other utilisations of seashells have although been detected. The shells, once emptied of their flesh, have sometimes been reemployed as a building material: they could be integrated in mortars and might have been a lime source. Furthermore, the great scallop has been used as a kind of ornament by pilgrims on their way to Saint James of Compostella. Finally, a few traces of purple production have been reported, with the presence of systematically broken dog whelks and sting winkles (Dupont, 2011).

Conclusion

It remains difficult to study the exploitation of marine invertebrates in the Middle Ages from a generalized point of view; archaeomalacological studies are still too scarce and textual data too scarce. However, as the discipline is developing, a few tendencies are emerging about consumption preferences, cooking habits, variety of utilisations, geographical disparities and means of

transportation. Those first results are thus opening a research area that we hope to be long and fruitful.

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