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ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXTS: THE  
MEGALITHIC MONUMENTS OF  
ARLES-FONTVIEILLE (SOUTHERN FRANCE,  
FINAL NEOLITHIC)**

L. Viel, Sandrine Bonnardin, Maxence Bailly

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QUESTIONING THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK OF FUNERARY ORNAMENTS IN DIFFICULT  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXTS: THE MEGALITHIC MONUMENTS OF ARLES-FONTVIEILLE (SOUTHERN  
FRANCE, FINAL NEOLITHIC)

Laurine Viel, Aix Marseille Univ, CNRS, Minist Culture, LAMPEA, Aix-en-Provence, France

Sandrine Bonnardin, Univ Nice Sophia Antipolis, CNRS, CEPAM, Nice, France

Maxence Bailly, Aix Marseille Univ, CNRS, Minist Culture, LAMPEA, Aix-en-Provence, France

Good morning, everyone,

I am going to present you the reflections that we had in the context of my PhD, on the analytical framework of funeral ornaments in difficult archaeological contexts, taking the example of Arles-Fontvieille megalithic monuments.

## Introduction:

Personal ornaments found in funeral contexts have been the subject of research for several decades. The accumulation and deepening of this research made possible the building of a strong methodological framework. The practice now seems to be quite well established, notably for optimal archaeological contexts with preserved connections, individual graves, and accurate chronologies. It has gradually provided a methodological basis, on which archaeologists have relied to interpret the status of objects and people, funeral practices, etc.

However, all these provisions seem to be more questionable in certain cases where the archaeological context is specific and constraining, such as old excavations, or burials without a detailed chronology or connection between the objects and the bones. This can influence interpretations. This is the case for Arles-Fontvieille megalithic monuments.

This complex, located in the south-east of France, includes four hypogea and a dolmen, probably built at the end of the 4th millennium B.C. M. Anibert, an historian, mention them in 1779. Most

excavations were undertaken in the second half of the 19th century. The quality is variable: emptying for the hypogea of La Source and Bounias, some test excavations for the great hypogeum of Cordes, real archaeological process for the hypogeum of Castelet and the dolmen of Coutignargues.

Since their excavation, these monuments have been the object of constant archaeological research, notably since the late 1990s. Archaeologists highlight the exceptional side of these monuments through two criteria: the original architecture of the hypogea (chambers dug with capstones) and the very large dimensions of the Cordes hypogeum (42,70 meters long and up to 4 meters high). These same researchers sometimes transfer the qualifier of exceptional to the objects contained in these monuments, notably to increase the status of this complex and of its occupants.

But it is a theoretical posture that we must question. Does it reflect reality in what concerns these monuments? these objects? Are all objects exceptional?

## 1. USE OF THE TERM “EXCEPTIONAL” BY ARCHAEOLOGISTS: A RAPID INVESTIGATION

To answer these questions, we, archaeologists need to know what we mean by exceptional. We conducted a quick investigation into the use of the term "exceptional" by archaeologists.

If we take the common sense, according to dictionaries, this term designates something that is not included in the general rule: as to its number (synonymous with rare), as to its value, as to its nature. In particular, what goes out of the usual rule by its high value. If we apply this definition to archaeology, an exceptional object, for example, is thus a rare and/or valuable object. In this investigation, we didn't attempt to distinguish rarity from value, since they may be related, but we identified the criteria used by archaeologists to determine the rarity or unusual value of certain objects, sites and graves.

We took a sample of 55 bibliographical references, in English, French, and Spanish where the term “exceptional” appears. As you can see on the PowerPoint, a lot of various criteria can be considered

to characterize the archaeological items as “exceptional”: rarity, raw material, quality, important dimensions, long occupation, ...

This quick investigation shows that, often:

- the use of the term “exceptional” is subjective. Indeed, there is a various range of criteria.
- But sometimes, the characteristics that are at the origin of the qualifier are not given.
- It is used too often.
- It sometimes provokes circular reasoning.

Is it not significant to note that anthropologists who work on socially valued objects do not use this word to describe an object category? They prefer to use: "precious objects", "sacred objects", "signs", "objects of power", ...

On the other hand, there is also a lack of accuracy in the vocabulary for objects that seem more common, banal. This type of material is rarely used to question status. In the studies of Fontvieille monuments, archaeologists do not use these objects to address the question. Only so-called exceptional objects are considered.

So, as archaeologists, we have practice problems with these corpuses. It is necessary to step back and ask ourselves on the way we question the status of objects. Back then, there had to be nuances in the categories of status, between the most socially valued objects and their opposites. We must reintroduce these shades to consider all the objects.

## 2. DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF STATUS? THE EXAMPLE OF ARLES-FONTVIEILLE ORNAMENTS.

We selected three types of objects from Arles-Fontvieille megalithic monuments that I’m going to present according to the importance that seems to be attributed to them. For each example, I’m

going to present different intrinsic characteristics divided in two categories: those for which it seems obvious to assign a status and those that could question this status.

### An undeniably high added value object: the golden bead of the hypogeum of Castelet

There is a good chance that the first example - the golden bead of Castelet- had a strong social value in the eyes of Neolithic populations. Indeed, the raw material of this bead is rare, and the populations probably acquired it by exchange. If there are larger objects of the same type, however, the one of Castelet has an unequalled weight in the Neolithic (36.84 grams). In addition, it appears to have been the subject of significant technical investment, particularly in the final polishing. Thanks to its weight, its material, and its low frequency (less than twenty in Europe), the golden bead of the Castelet hypogeum seems to stand out from the rest. However, unlike other Arles-Fontvieille elements, it was probably used.

### The turquoise beads of the hypogeum of Castelet and the dolmen of Coutignargues

The second example, the turquoise beads are generally considered as socially valued object because of their rare raw material, but less than the golden bead. In addition, other characteristics seem to classify these beads in the socially valued objects:

- the material deposits are far from Arles-Fontvieille,
- their important number within Arles-Fontvieille (80),
- and the fact that this type of object is infrequent.

In southeastern France, only six Neolithic sites delivered turquoise beads, and their number did not exceed 5. We can also add that these beads are little or not used. It is however necessary to note the heterogeneity of the shapes and dimensions, as well as the absence of finishing of the turquoise objects. Indeed, unlike other beads, these have not been polished. We can always observe the shaping marks. These criteria could nuance their social value.

## The discoid beads in steatite of the hypogeum of Castelet and the dolmen of Coutignargues

For the third example, we decided to show you objects that seem more common. Indeed, the discoid steatite beads are frequently found in the sites of the final Neolithic and this raw material is often used for the manufacture of ornamental elements. Indeed, according to some studies, 53% of the studied sites have elements in steatite. In another example, on 83 sites where discoid beads have been found, H. Barge identified 56 of them with steatite beads. However, these objects are present in large numbers in Fontvieille. They also have calibrated dimensions, characteristics generally used as an indication of a higher status.

The three examples presented show that all objects have to be studied, even those whose status seems most obvious. Indeed, by considering various criteria, we saw that the golden bead whose material is rare, is used, whereas the turquoise beads, whose material is slightly more frequent, are not. Do these ornamental elements, both seen as strong social markers, have the same status? All too often, objects are classified between those that are socially valued and those that are not, but the preceding examples show that it is necessary to reintroduce nuances between them.

To do this, we must consider a certain number of intrinsic characteristics of the object such as:

- The raw material
  - Physical properties: color, gloss, etc.
  - The rarity of deposits and raw materials
  - The distance of the deposits, which require to integrate a network of exchange to be supplied
- The morphology of the object
  - Shape
  - Dimensions
- The frequency in the sites

- The number of objects of the same typology and material in the site or grave.

We also have to integrate the results of the technological study, such as the state of progress in the chaîne opératoire, the uniformity of production, in other words whether or not there is standardization of objects, the investment in production, and the know-how.

It is also necessary to consider the results of functional studies: have the ornaments been worn or not? and in which way?

It seems important to take into account as many intrinsic characteristics as possible when we got into the question of the object status. However, we must think of the meaning and interpretation of these criteria. Indeed, a characteristic can be interpreted as a sign of a socially high value or the opposite. If we take the example of the use of objects, a new object and a very worn object can be interpreted as socially valued elements. In other Neolithic contexts, the hyper-standardization of dimensions is seen as indication of socially valued objects. Of course, the interpretation of the intrinsic characteristics must be made according to the context, but for the ornaments of the Arles-Fontvieille monuments, these parameters were not all the time taken into account.

## Conclusion

Archeological reasonings are based on comparisons. There is no comparison for Arles-Fontvieille monuments. That's why the interpretations are less rigorous.

So, we have, as archaeologists, a real choice of scientific strategy. How do we prioritize data? What is important to classify an object in one status or another? Its use or the rarity of its raw material? Its hyper-calibration or the distance of the deposits? Without even mentioning the abusive and subjective use of the term "exceptional", the vagueness in its definition, the minorization of more banal objects that conceal part of reality, we must face a real scientific problem. To address questions of object status, it is therefore highly necessary to construct a rigorous interpretative framework based on well-defined criteria and taking all objects into account. The natural temptation

of the scientist would be to prioritize criteria to develop categories, but should we do so? can we do without them? We see here, the difficulty of the archaeologist's practice.

To illustrate our remarks, I will end with this quotation from P. Lemonnier, demonstrating that important objects are not necessarily beautiful or remarkable.

« Les archéologues noteront que certains de ces objets formidablement importants pour un groupe et pour les relations entre individus qui le constituent sont malheureusement impossible à repérer : un « fabuleux » objet sacré des Anga ressemble à s'y méprendre à n'importe quel paquet magique utilisé par ces groupes [Lemonnier, 2006] ; un tambour ankave est parfaitement banal, et n'a rien à voir, en particulier, avec les « splendides » objets de la Côte sud de la Nouvelle-Guinée montrés dans les vitrines du musée du quai Branly. »  
Lemonnier 2012 p. 287