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Mesolithic pit-sites in Champagne (France): First data, key issues

Nathalie Achard-Corompt, Emmanuel Ghesquière, Christophe Laurelut, Charlotte Leduc, Arnaud Remy, Richard Isabelle, Vincent Riquier, Luc Sanson, Julia Wattez

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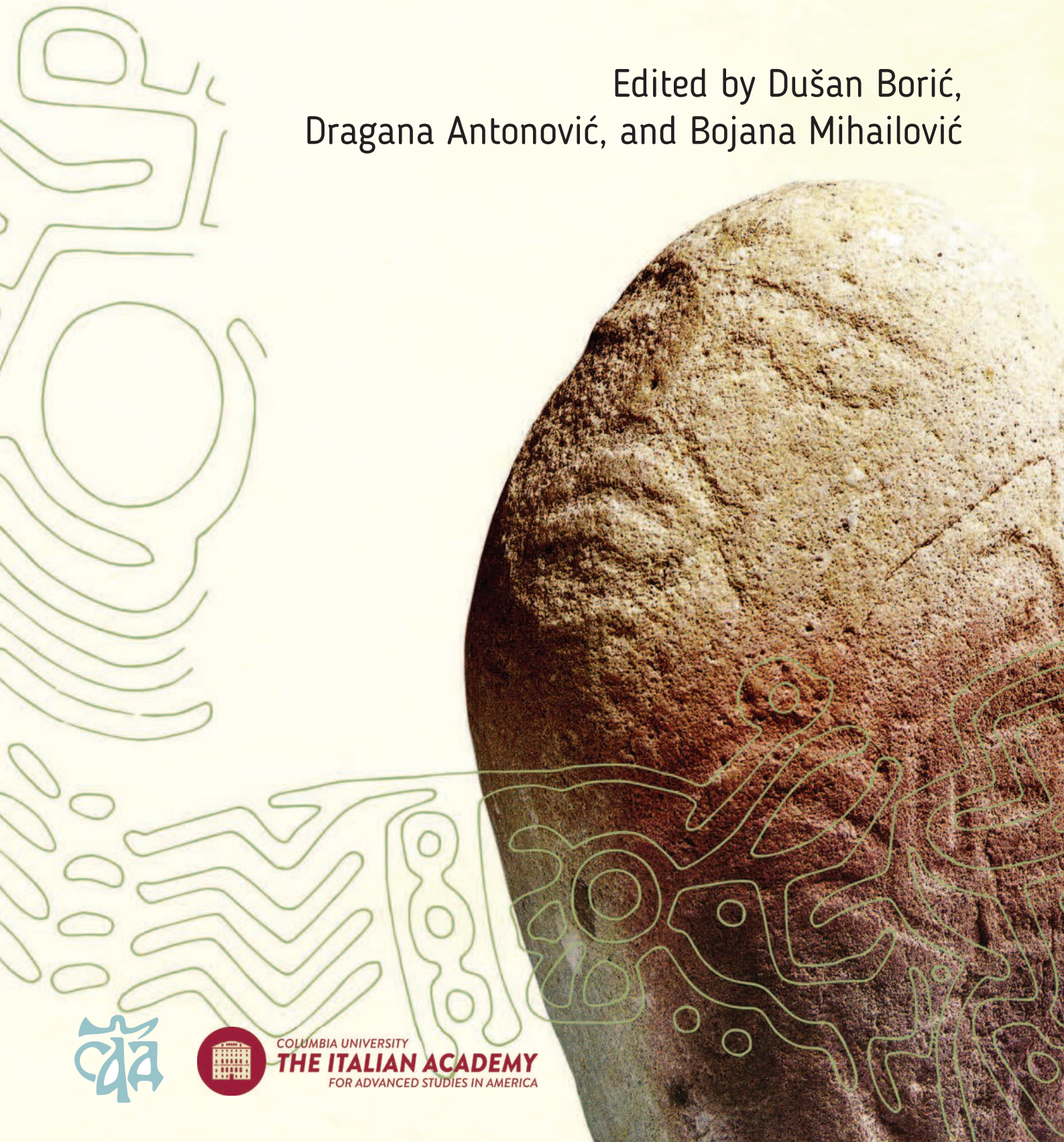
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Foraging Assemblages

Volume **1**

Edited by Dušan Borić,
Dragana Antonović, and Bojana Mihailović



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
THE ITALIAN ACADEMY
FOR ADVANCED STUDIES IN AMERICA

Foraging Assemblages

Volume 1

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VOLUME I

List of Contributors	ix
Preface	xxv
The Danube Gorges Mesolithic: The first fifty years (<i>Dušan Borić</i>)	xxvii
Transitions – Beginnings	1
1 Introduction: Transitions – Beginnings (<i>Dušan Mihailović and Robert Whallon</i>)	3
2 Transition and tradition: Lithic variability in the cave of Vlakno, Croatia (<i>Dario Vujević and Mario Bodružić</i>)	5
3 Workspace organization of a Final Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer camp (<i>Anton A. Simonenko and Olesya I. Uspenskaya Aleksandrova</i>)	12
4 The problem of the Palaeolithic to Mesolithic transition on the Upper and Middle Don River (central Russia) (<i>Alexander N. Bessudnov and Alexander A. Bessudnov</i>)	20
5 Early Holocene human adaptation and palaeoenvironment of the north-western Caucasus (Elena V. Leonova, Olesya I. Uspenskaya, Natalia V. Serdyuk, Elena A. Spiridonova, Alexey S. Tesakov, Elena V. Chernysheva, Pavel D. Frolov, and Elena V. Syromyatnikova)	29
6 Early Mesolithic of northern Bohemia: 2015 excavations (<i>Jiří Svoboda</i>)	36
7 The last hunter-gatherers of South Arabia: A review of the Terminal Pleistocene and Early Holocene archaeological record (<i>Yamandú Hieronymus Hilbert</i>)	45
Colonization	53
8 Introduction: Colonization	55
9 First Mesolithic occupations at high altitudes in Vercors (Isère, France): The case studies of Les Coins I, Roybon, and Gerland (<i>Alexandre Angelin and Régis Picavet</i>)	57
10 The Mesolithic site of Borovskoye 2 in light of the Pre-Boreal habitation in Karelia (<i>Sergey Lisitsyn, Alexey Tarasov, Nataliya Tsvetkova, and Stanislav Belsky</i>)	64
11 The Mesolithic of Fontanella rockshelter (Vilafranca, eastern Mediterranean Iberia) and the last hunters-gatherers of northern Valencian country (<i>Didac Román, Inés Domingo, and Jordi Nadal</i>)	74
Landscapes	83
12 Introduction: Landscapes (<i>Dušan Borić</i>)	85
13 The missing landscapes and territories of Mesolithic Portugal (<i>Ana Cristina Araújo and Ana Maria Costa</i>)	88
14 A comparative perspective on Mesolithic assemblages from different landscapes in Bohemia (<i>Katarína Kapustka, Jan Eigner, and Matthew Walls</i>)	94
15 The Early Mesolithic of the Piave River basin: Mountain tops, riverbanks, and seashores? (<i>Federica Fontana, Davide Visentin, and Stefano Bertola</i>)	102
16 Integrating communities and landscape: A wetland perspective from the Lower Rhine area (<i>Luc W. S. W. Amkreutz</i>)	110

17	Tracing raw materials: Procurement strategies and movements in the Early Mesolithic, a case study from Larvik, south-eastern Norway (<i>Guro Fossum</i>)	118
18	Local or imported? Tracking the provenance of flint raw materials of the Mesolithic habitants of Estonia and northern Latvia with the help of geochemical methods (<i>Kristiina Johanson, Aivar Kriiska, Jaan Aruväli, Peeter Somelar, Kaarel Sikk, and Liina Sepp</i>)	123
19	The Upper Dee Tributaries Project: Finding the Mesolithic in the mountains of Scotland (Shannon M. Fraser, Gordon Noble, Graeme Warren, Richard Tipping, Danny Paterson, Wishart Mitchell, Ann Clarke, and Caroline R. Wickham-Jones)	129
20	Surviving Doggerland (<i>Caroline R. Wickham-Jones</i>)	135
21	A Mesolithic moment in time: The Drumnaglea Cache (<i>Peter Woodman† and Sarah Close</i>)	142
22	Transient campsites, logistic campsites, and the cumulative taphonomy of Malham Tarn site A: A persistent place in the northern Pennines (<i>William A. Lovis and Randolph E. Donahue</i>)	148
	Settlement	157
23	Introduction: Settlements, dwellings, pits, and middens – still very far from a theory of everything! (<i>Ole Grøn and Nuno Bicho</i>)	159
24	Of space and time: The non-midden components of the Cabeço da Amoreira Mesolithic shell mound (Muge, central Portugal) (<i>João Cascalheira, Nuno Bicho, Célia Gonçalves, Daniel García-Rivero, and Pedro Horta</i>)	162
25	Looking for the ‘Asturian’ dwelling areas: New data from El Alloru and Sierra Plana de la Borbolla (Asturias, Spain) (<i>Pablo Arias, Miriam Cubas, Miguel Ángel Fano, Esteban Álvarez-Fernández, Ana Cristina Araújo, Marián Cueto, Patricia Fernández Sánchez, Eneko Iriarte, Inés L. López-Dóriga, Sara Núñez, Christoph Salzmann, Carlos Duarte, Felix Teichner, Luis C. Teira, and Paloma Uzquiano</i>)	169
26	Habitation areas in Asturian shell middens and site formation processes: Mazaculos II cave (La Franca, Asturias, northern Iberia) and the new sites of El Total III and El Mazo (<i>Manuel R. González Morales</i>)	177
27	Mesolithic settlement patterns and occupation of central and eastern Cantabria (Spain) (<i>Mercedes Pérez-Bartolomé</i>)	184
28	Domestic life by the ocean: Beg-er-Vil, c. 6200–6000 cal BC (<i>Grégor Marchand and Catherine Dupont</i>)	191
29	Mesolithic pit-sites in Champagne (France): First data, key issues (<i>Nathalie Achard-Corompt, Emmanuel Ghesquiere, Christophe Laurelut, Charlotte Leduc, Arnaud Remy, Isabelle Richard, Vincent Riquier, Luc Sanson, and Julia Wattez</i>)	198
30	Some observations on the archaeological record of the (Late) Mesolithic in the northern Netherlands (<i>Marcel J. L. Th. Niekus</i>)	202
31	Life on the lake edge: Mesolithic habitation at Star Carr (<i>Nicky Milner, Chantal Conneller, Barry Taylor, Mike Bamforth, Julian C. Carty, Shannon Croft, Ben Elliott, Becky Knight, Aimée Little, Harry K. Robson, Charlotte C. A. Rowley, and Maisie Taylor</i>)	210
32	Late Mesolithic shallow pithouse from Sąsieczno 4 (central Poland) (<i>Grzegorz Osipowicz</i>)	216
33	Mesolithic complexes on the right bank of the Vyatka River (the middle Volga Basin) (<i>Tatyana Gusentsova</i>)	223
34	Mesolithic hearth-pits and cooking-pits in western Sweden and south-eastern Norway: When, where, how, and a bit about why (<i>Robert Hernek</i>)	227
35	Mesolithic ‘ghost’ sites and related Stone Age problems with lithics (<i>Ole Grøn and Hans Peeters</i>)	233
36	Sømmevågen. A Late Mesolithic–Early Neolithic settlement complex in south-western Norway: Preliminary results (<i>Trond Meling, Hilde Fyllingen, and Sean D. Denham</i>)	240
37	Mesolithic settlement on Utsira, western Norway: Mesolithic hunter-gatherers in transition as reflected by dwellings and site patterns (<i>Arne Johan Nærøy</i>)	246
38	Mesolithic dwellings from Motala, Sweden (<i>Ann Westermarck</i>)	252

Regional Identities	259
39 Introduction: Regional identities (<i>Rick Schulting</i>)	261
40 Holocene foraging in the Dinaric Alps: Current research on the Mesolithic of Montenegro (<i>Dušan Borić, Emanuela Cristiani, Ljiljana Đuričić, Dragana Filipović, Ethel Allué, Zvezdana Vušović-Lučić, and Nikola Borovinić</i>)	264
41 New perspectives on the Mesolithic of the Sado Valley (southern Portugal): Preliminary results of the SADO MESO project (<i>Pablo Arias, Mariana T. Diniz, Ana Cristina Araújo, Ángel Armendariz, and Luis C. Teira</i>)	274
42 The 'Asturian' and its neighbours in the twenty-first century: Recent perspectives on the Mesolithic of northern Spain (<i>Pablo Arias, Esteban Álvarez-Fernández, Miriam Cubas, Miguel Ángel Fano, María J. Iriarte-Chiapusso, Mercedes Pérez Bartolomé, and Jesús Tapia</i>)	281
43 The Mesolithic in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula (Galicia, Spain): The state of art (<i>Eduardo Ramil Rego, Natividad Fuertes Prieto, Carlos Fernández Rodríguez, Eduardo González Gómez de Agüero, and Ana Neira Campos</i>)	289
44 The last foragers in the north-east of the Iberian Peninsula: New evidence of human occupation during the seventh/sixth millennia cal BC (<i>Antoni Palomo, Igor Bodganovic, Raquel Piqué, Rafel Rosillo, Xavier Terradas, Marta Alcolea, Marian Berihuete, and Maria Saña</i>)	295
45 The Late Mesolithic of the south-western coast of Portugal: The lithic industry of Vale Marim I in focus (<i>Joaquina Soares, Niccolò Mazzucco, and Carlos Tavares da Silva</i>)	301
46 The temporality of the Mesolithic in southern France (<i>Thomas Perrin</i>)	308
47 Re-evaluating the old excavation from Pinnberg, Germany (<i>Daniel Groß, Steffen Berckhan, Nadine Hauschild, Anna-Lena Räder, and Anne Sohst</i>)	312
48 Exploring early Ertebølle: Results of preliminary assessments at a submerged site in the Kiel Bay (Baltic Sea, Germany) and its potential (<i>Julia Goldhammer, Annika B. Müller, Laura Brandt, Steffen Wolters, and Sönke Hartz</i>)	318
49 Identifying regional practices in cave use during the Mesolithic in south-western Britain (<i>Caroline Rosen</i>)	324
50 About time for the Mesolithic near Stonehenge: New perspectives from Trench 24 at Blick Mead, Vespasian's Camp, Amesbury (<i>David Jacques, Tom Lyons, Barry Bishop, and Tom Phillips</i>)	330
51 Secrets of Blue Maiden: The archaeology of a virgin island in the Baltic Sea (<i>Kenneth Alexandersson, Anna-Karin Andersson, and Ludvig Pappmehl-Dufay</i>)	337
52 Mesolithic site locations in the river valleys of Karelia, west of Ladoga Lake, Russia (<i>Hannu Takala, Mark. M. Shakhnovich, Aleksey Yu. Tarasov, and Anssi Malinen</i>)	345

VOLUME II

People in Their Environment	355
53 Introduction: People in their environment (<i>Clive Bonsall and Vesna Dimitrijević</i>)	357
54 Late Glacial to Early Holocene environs and wood use at Lepenski Vir (<i>Ethel Allué, Dragana Filipović, Emanuela Cristiani, and Dušan Borić</i>)	359
55 Plant use at the Mesolithic site of Parque Darwin (Madrid, Spain) (<i>Marian Berihuete Azorín, Marta Alcolea Gracia, Raquel Piqué i Huerta, and Javier Baena Preysler</i>)	367
56 A tale of foxes and deer, or how people changed their eating habits during the Mesolithic at Vlakno cave (Croatia) (<i>Siniša Radović, Victoria Pía Spry-Marqués, and Dario Vujević</i>)	374
57 Coastal resource exploitation patterns and climatic conditions during the Early Mesolithic in the Cantabrian region (northern Iberia): Preliminary data from the shell midden site of El Mazo (<i>Asier García-Escárzaga, Igor Gutiérrez-Zugasti, David Cuenca-Solana, Adolfo Cobo, and Manuel R. González-Morales</i>)	382

58	How ‘marine’ were coastal Mesolithic diets? (<i>Rick J. Schulting</i>)	389
59	The seasonality of hunting during the Mesolithic in southern Scandinavia (<i>Ola Magnell</i>)	398
60	Incremental growth line analysis of the European oyster (<i>Ostrea edulis</i> , Linnaeus, 1758) from the kitchen midden at Eskilsø, Denmark (<i>Harry K. Robson, Søren A. Sørensen, Eva M. Laurie, and Nicky Milner</i>)	404
61	Skellerup Enge: Evidence for a distinctive subsistence economy in western Denmark during the early Ertebølle (<i>Kenneth Ritchie, Søren H. Andersen, and Esben Kannegaard</i>)	410
62	Hunting beyond red deer: Exploring species patterning in Early Mesolithic faunal assemblages in Britain and north-western Europe (<i>Nick J. Overton</i>)	416
63	Size estimations of sturgeons (<i>Acipenseridae</i>) from the Mesolithic-Neolithic Danube Gorges (<i>Ivana Živaljević, Igor V. Askeyev, Dilyara N. Shaymuratova (Galimova), Oleg V. Askeyev, Sergey P. Monakhov, Dušan Borić, and Sofija Stefanović</i>)	422
	Technology	429
64	Introduction: Technology (<i>Federica Fontana, Emanuela Cristiani, and Dušan Mihailović</i>)	431
65	<i>Couteaux de Rouffignac</i> : A new insight into an old tool (<i>Davide Visentin, Sylvie Philibert, and Nicolas Valdeyron</i>)	434
66	The lithic assemblage of the Mesolithic station of Alp2 (pre-alpine mountain range of Chartreuse, northern French Alps): Preliminary data (<i>Jocelyn Robbe</i>)	440
67	The First and Second Mesolithic of La Grande Rivoire (Vercors range, Isère, France): A diachronic perspective on lithic technology (<i>Alexandre Angelin, Thomas Perrin, and Pierre-Yves Nicod</i>)	444
68	Techno-functional approach to a technological breakthrough: The Second Mesolithic of Montclus rockshelter (Gard, France) (<i>Elsa Defranould, Sylvie Philibert, and Thomas Perrin</i>)	452
69	The late microblade complexes and the emergence of geometric microliths in north-eastern Iberia (<i>Dídac Román, Pilar García-Argüelles, Jordi Nadal, and Josep Maria Fullola</i>)	457
70	Mesolithic raw material management south of the Picos de Europa (northern Spain) (<i>Diego Herrero-Alonso, Natividad Fuertes-Prieto, and Ana Neira-Campos</i>)	464
71	New perspectives on Mesolithic technology in northern Iberia: Data from El Mazo shell midden site (Asturias, Spain) (<i>Natividad Fuertes-Prieto, John Risetto, Igor Gutiérrez-Zugasti, David Cuenca-Solana, and Manuel R. González Morales</i>)	470
72	The conical core pressure blade concept: A Mesolithic <i>chaîne opératoire</i> (<i>Tuija Rankama and Jarmo Kankaanpää</i>)	476
73	Middle and Late Mesolithic microblade technology in eastern Norway: Gradual development or abrupt change? (<i>Svein Vatsvåg Nielsen and Torgeir Winther</i>)	482
74	Shaori II: An obsidian workshop in Javakheti, Georgia (<i>Dimitri Narimanishvili, Petranka Nedelcheva, and Ivan Gatsov</i>)	490
75	Finding, shaping, hiding: Caching behaviour in the Middle Mesolithic of south-eastern Norway (<i>Lucia Uchermann Koxvold</i>)	495
76	Hafting flake axes: Technological and functional aspects of an assemblage from north-western Norway (<i>John Asbjørn Havstein</i>)	499
77	Quantifying Irish shale Mesolithic axes/adzes (<i>Bernard Gilhooly</i>)	505
78	Technology of osseous artefacts in the Mesolithic Danube Gorges: The evidence from Vlasac (Serbia) (<i>Emanuela Cristiani and Dušan Borić</i>)	512
79	Antler in material culture of the Iron Gates Mesolithic (<i>Selena Vitezović</i>)	520
80	Tools made from wild boar canines during the French Mesolithic: A technological and functional study of the collection from Le Cuzoul de Gramat (France) (<i>Benjamin Marquebielle and Emmanuelle Fabre</i>)	526

81	Lost at the bottom of the lake. Leister prongs from the Early and Middle Mesolithic (<i>Lars Larsson, Björn Nilsson, and Arne Sjöström</i>)	535
82	Late Glacial and Early Holocene osseous projectile weaponry from the Polish Lowlands: The case of a point from Witów (<i>Justyna Orłowska</i>)	540
	Social Relations, Communication, Mobility	547
83	Introduction: Social relations, communication, mobility (<i>Chantal Conneller</i>)	549
84	Role of personal ornaments: Vlakno cave (Croatia) (<i>Barbara Cvitkušić and Dario Vujević</i>)	551
85	Marine shells as grave goods at S'Ormu e S'Orku (Sardinia, Italy) (<i>Emanuela Cristiani, Rita T. Melis, and Margherita Mussi</i>)	558
86	Visual information in Cabeço da Amoreira, Muge (Portugal): Shell adornment technology (<i>Lino André and Nuno Bicho</i>)	567
87	Neighbours on the other side of the sea: Late Mesolithic relations in eastern Middle Sweden (<i>Jenny Holm</i>)	574
88	Sedentary hunters, mobile farmers: The spread of agriculture into prehistoric Europe (<i>T. Douglas Price, Lars Larsson, Ola Magnell, and Dušan Boric</i>)	579
	Rites and Symbols	585
89	Introduction: Rites and Symbols (<i>Judith M. Grünberg and Lars Larsson</i>)	587
90	A portable object in motion – Complex layers of meaning embedded in an ornamented sandstone-object from the Late Mesolithic site of Brunstad (Norway) (<i>Almut Schülke</i>)	590
91	Net patterns in Mesolithic art of north-western Europe (<i>Tomasz Płonka</i>)	595
92	Protective patterns in Mesolithic art (<i>Peter Vang Petersen</i>)	602
93	Mesolithic engraved bone pins: The art of fashion at Téviec (Morbihan, France) (<i>Éva David</i>)	610
94	Final destruction and ultimate humiliation of an enemy during the Mesolithic of southern Scandinavia (<i>Erik Brinch Petersen</i>)	619
95	Archaeological remains of Mesolithic funerary rites and symbols (<i>Judith M. Grünberg</i>)	622
96	Buried side by side: The last hunter-gatherers of the south-western Iberian Peninsula through the lens of their mortuary practices (<i>Rita Peyroteo-Stjerna</i>)	629
97	Depositions of human skulls and cremated bones along the River Motala Ström at Strandvägen, Motala (<i>Fredrik Molin, Sara Gummesson, Linus Hagberg, and Jan Storå</i>)	637
98	Human–animal symbolism within a ritual space in the Mesolithic wetland deposit at Kanaljorden, Motala (<i>Fredrik Hallgren, Sara Gummesson, Karin Berggren, and Jan Storå</i>)	644
99	What are grave goods? Some thoughts about finds and features in Mesolithic mortuary practice (<i>Lars Larsson</i>)	649
100	Mesolithic companions: The significance of animal remains within Mesolithic burials in Zvejnieki and Skateholm (<i>Aija Macāne</i>)	655
101	Pit or grave? 'Emptied' graves from the cemetery at Dudka, Masuria, north-eastern Poland (<i>Karolina Bugajska</i>)	660
102	Beware of dogs! Burials and loose dog bones at Dudka and Szczepanki, Masuria, north-eastern Poland (<i>Witold Gumiński</i>)	668
103	Shamans in the Mesolithic? Re-analysis of antler headdresses from the North European Plain (<i>Markus Wild</i>)	678
104	Birds in ritual practice of eastern European forest hunter-gatherers (<i>Ekaterina Kashina and Elena Kaverzneva</i>)	685

Transitions – Endings	693
105 Transitions – Endings: Introduction (<i>T. Douglas Price</i>)	695
106 Modelling the empty spaces: Mesolithic in the micro-region of central Serbia (<i>Vera Bogosavljević Petrović and Andrej Starović</i>)	699
107 How North Iberia was lost? The Early Neolithic in Cantabrian Spain (<i>Miguel Ángel Fano and Miriam Cubas</i>)	706
108 Debating Neolithization from a Mesolithic point of view: The Sado Valley (Portugal) experience (<i>Mariana Diniz, Pablo Arias Cabal, Ana Cristina Araújo, and Rita Peyroteo-Stjerna</i>)	713
109 The Caucasian route of Neolithization in the Pontic-Caspian region (<i>Alexander Gorelik, Andrej Tsybriy, and Viktor Tsybriy</i>)	720
110 The Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic of the Kama region, Russia: Aspects of the Neolithization process (<i>Evgeniia Lychagina</i>)	727
111 The Late Mesolithic in western Lesser Poland: Spectators or participants in the Neolithization? (<i>Marek Nowak, Mirosław Zajac, and Justyna Zakrzeńska</i>)	733
112 Wetland sites in a dry land area. A survey for Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic sites in and around the Zwischenahner Meer Lake, Germany (<i>Svea Mahlstedt</i>)	740
113 Forager-farmer contacts in the Scheldt Basin (Flanders, Belgium) in the late sixth-early fifth millennia BC: Evidence from the site of Bazel-Sluis (<i>Erwin Meylemans, Yves Perdaen, Joris Sergeant, Jan Bastiaens, Koen Deforce, Anton Ervynck, and Philippe Crombé</i>)	746
114 Ritual continuity between the Late Mesolithic Ertebølle and Early Neolithic Funnel Beaker cultures (<i>Søren Anker Sørensen</i>)	750
115 Continuity and change: hunters and farmers in the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition, Östergötland, eastern middle Sweden (<i>Tom Carlsson</i>)	756
116 The Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in South Norway: Cylindrical blade technology as an indicator of change (<i>Dag Erik Færø Olsen</i>)	763
Representing and Narrating the Mesolithic	771
117 Introduction: Representing and Narrating the Mesolithic (<i>Nicky Milner</i>)	773
118 Mesolithic movie stars: Analyzing rare film archives of the Muge excavations from the early twentieth century (<i>Ana Abrunhosa and António H. B. Gonçalves</i>)	776
119 Elusive, perplexing, and peculiar? Presenting the Mesolithic to twenty-first century audiences (<i>Don Henson</i>)	785
120 Public perceptions and engagement with the Jomon and the Mesolithic (<i>Don Henson</i>)	789
121 Building Mesolithic: An experimental archaeological approach to Mesolithic buildings in Ireland (<i>Graeme Warren</i>)	796
Index	805

29. Mesolithic pit-sites in Champagne (France): First data, key issues

Nathalie Achard-Corompt, Emmanuel Ghesquiere, Christophe Laurelut, Charlotte Leduc, Arnaud Remy, Isabelle Richard, Vincent Riquier, Luc Sanson, and Julia Watzet

In less than a decade, more than 30 sites and around 200 deep pits dated to the Mesolithic have been identified in the Champagne-Ardenne region (north-eastern France). This paper describes the main characteristics of these features and provides some clues for their interpretation. This unexpected but apparently common type of site clearly implies a more marked territoriality and a greater social complexity than generally proposed for the period in continental northern France.

Keywords: deep pits, storage, hunting, territoriality, social complexity

A decade ago, the existence of deep pits prior to the Neolithic agricultural colonization had hardly been recorded in France (Verjux 2003), and the pits that had been recorded were assumed to have been associated with quite particular sites. Since 2007, however, mechanized test trenching and rescue excavations conducted in the Champagne-Ardenne region of France have repeatedly encountered a series of deep pits consistently radiocarbon-dated to the Mesolithic. These constitute a new kind of site, one clearly quite frequent although entirely unexpected for the period.

The recurrent identification of these features and the rapid construction of a large dataset on a regional scale has mainly resulted from the proactive, large-scale policy of development-led archaeological evaluations and excavations conducted by the local Regional Archaeology Service of the French Ministry of Culture (Blancquaert *et al.* 2011). In the field, these features, at first glance seemingly ‘indeterminate’ or doubtful, have been routinely documented by INRAP teams and systematically radiocarbon-dated (Laurelut *et al.* 2014). Meanwhile, a smaller number of similar discoveries have been made in many other regions of northern France (Achard-Corompt *et al.* 2018), showing much larger (continental?) geographical scale of the phenomenon.

By the beginning of 2015, more than 200 pits at 33 sites were excavated and recorded for Champagne alone (Fig. 29.1). The years 2013 and 2014 marked a major threshold with the excavation of the site of Recy, Marne (Achard-Corompt 2015). The plan of the site included several dozen pits, enabling a more in-depth spatial analysis. Apart from radiocarbon dating, these features have been subject to a range of analyses; examining their morphology, the nature

and history of their filling, the quite sparse archaeological material recovered, and the local environment in order to investigate pits’ function(s) and beyond that the broader socio-economic significance of these pit-sites.

We summarize the current evidence below. While these observations have only been validated for the Champagne region, we believe they may be applicable to most of the great plain of north-western Europe.

1. Far from being unusual, the digging of deep pits is an extremely common practice during the Mesolithic. Although there are a number of morphological variations (Fig. 29.2), the majority of these pits have a cylindrical section with a flat base. The diameter of cylindrical features is about 1 m for the smaller ones and 2 m for the larger ones, with a comparable depth range. More rare are the oval- or funnel-shaped types, which average 2.5–3 m in diameter with a depth of 1.5–2 m. About one third of all pits include a narrow – and usually centrally located – depression at the base (a stake hole?).

2. Identification of these features can be difficult, as their fill is often very similar to the surrounding sediments. When excavated by hand, hardened upper layers of the fill can be mistaken for the bottom of the feature. Excavation with a machine bucket beyond the pit’s edges is thus required to expose the profile (Fig. 29.3), particularly in soft ground.

3. The stratigraphy is complex but typified by carbonate-rich cemented layers. The high carbonate content occurs in the form of micritic micromass (silt) and pedogenic carbonate. Some of them are inherited, such as calcium carbonate nodules or micritic coatings. They also contain calcitic pseudomorphs of stems or leaves, which could be related to the use of the pits. The cementation

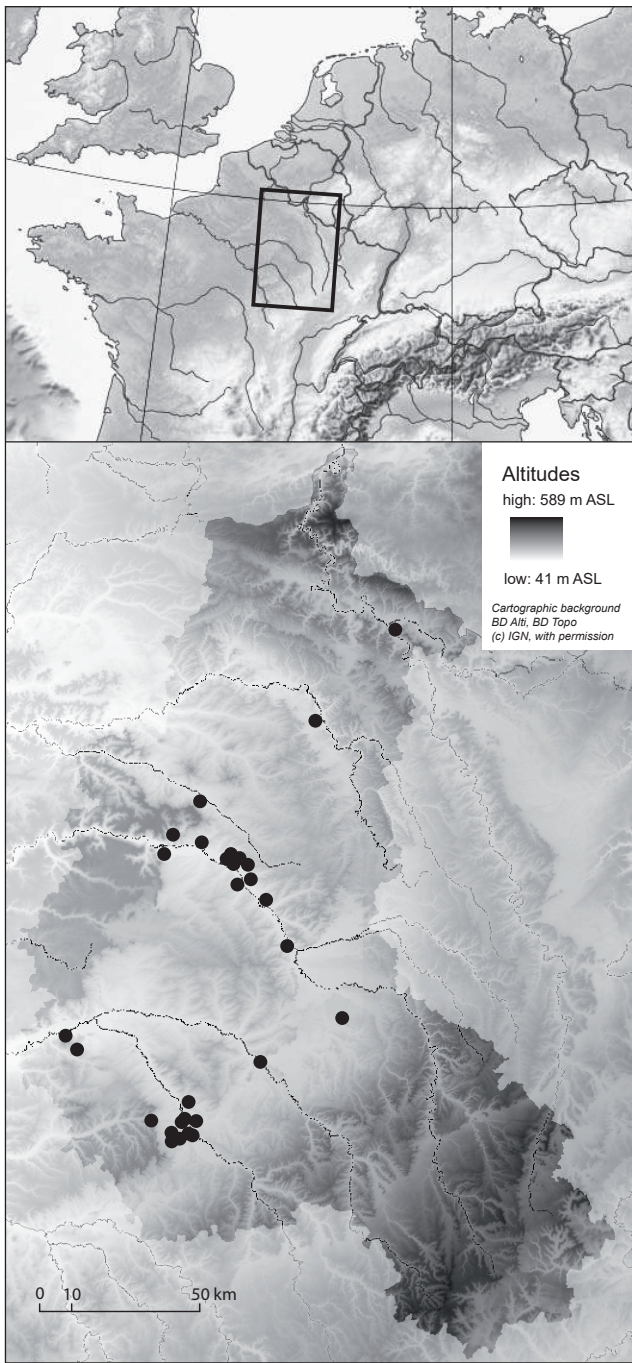


Fig. 29.1. Distribution of Mesolithic pit-sites in Champagne-Ardenne, France.

is the result of dissolution/precipitation processes of the carbonate content, related to the fluctuation over time of moister conditions in the soil.

4. The pit fill generally contains very few ecofacts and artefacts, which are mainly recovered through large-scale sieving. The lithic industry, represented in only one out of ten pits, is limited to two kinds of artefact: fragments of blades/bladelets and armatures. The presence of these two

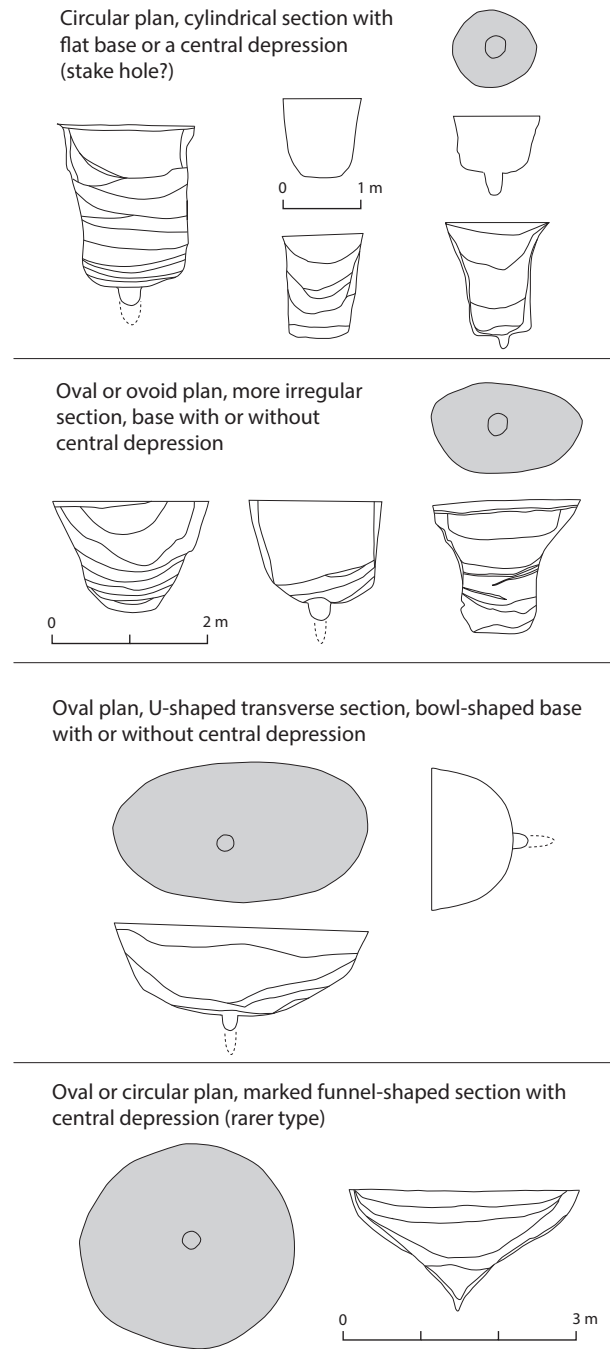


Fig. 29.2. Different types of Mesolithic pit sections.

specific types is usually connected with hunting and/or carcass processing.

Faunal remains are still less frequent. They are attributed to different taxa common in Mesolithic faunal spectra (aurochs, roe deer, boar, red deer, and dog) and are found as complete skeletons or isolated bones, probably reflecting different origins and intentions. The question of intentional deposits of a symbolic kind can be raised for at least some of them.

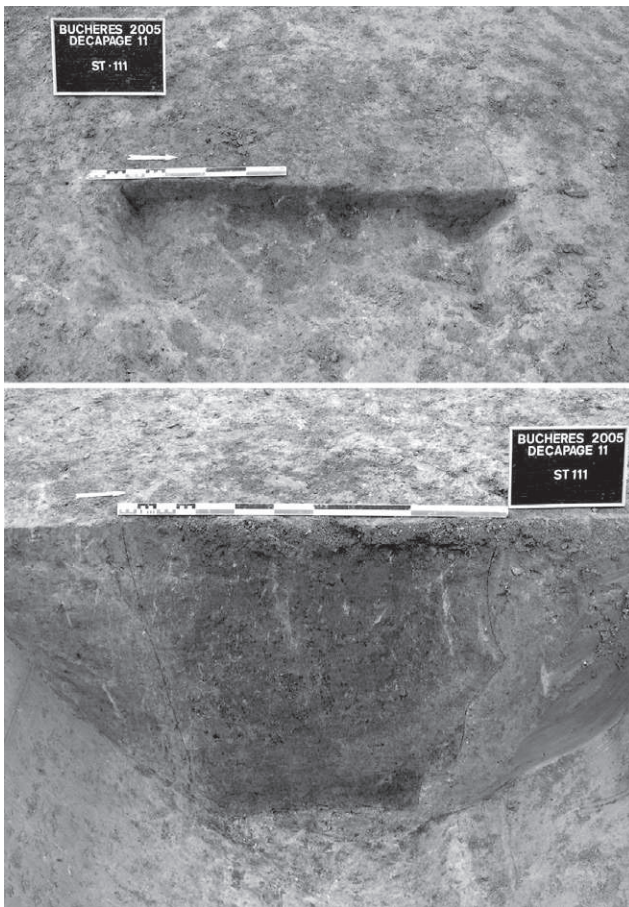


Fig. 29.3. Example of a Mesolithic pit found at Parc Logistique de l'Aube. Above: manual excavation stops on the upper hardened layers. Below: mechanical excavation of the same feature, revealing the profile of a deep, regular pit.

5. Radiocarbon dating is the main method for the chronological attribution of these pits. Almost all measurements have been obtained on charcoal samples from

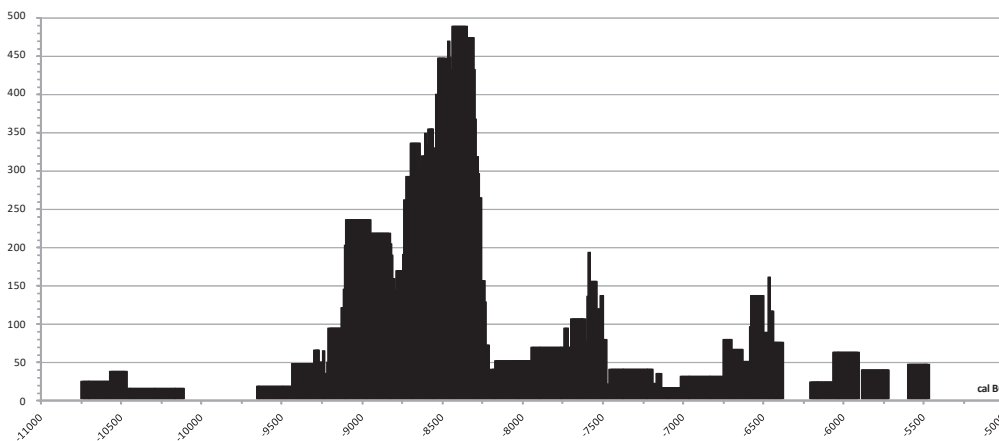


Fig. 29.4. Cumulative probability density of radiocarbon dates for Mesolithic pits in Champagne (as of January 2015: 73 measurements). Dates were calibrated using OxCal v.4.2.

the bottom of the fill. Their chronology extends over the whole period, but the major peak is seen during the Early Mesolithic (Fig. 29.4).

6. A strong relationship exists between pit-sites and a specific kind of local substratum (loess deposits over chalky bedrock) linked to their preferential topographic location on the edges of major alluvial valleys. This distribution could reflect a relationship with specific biotopes, although this needs to be clarified by environmental analyses. These Mesolithic features are also identified in the same topographic positions as the 'Y-shaped'/*Schlitzgruben* pits, attributed to the Neolithic or Bronze Age and interpreted as hunting pits.

7. On most excavations, including small sites, pits recurrently seem to be aligned on a broadly recti- or curvilinear pattern (Fig. 29.5). At present, there is no evidence to determine whether this spatial organization is intentional, *i.e.* planned, or results from some kind of environmental (topographic, edaphic?) constraint.

8. In general, these pit-sites appear disconnected from the more traditional open-air sites with layers of lithic and/or faunal material. But in the exposed contexts where pit-sites are found, agricultural erosion could often have removed any trace of the original Mesolithic occupation layer. Rare examples of entirely truncated Mesolithic sites, with residual artefacts trapped in later (Neolithic) features, reflect the reality of this process of erosion, which of course does not imply that every pit-site was originally associated with an occupation layer.

The possible functions of these pits are numerous. By morphological analogy with later features, the simplest hypothesis is that they are storage pits, particularly for gathered food such as hazelnuts and acorns. But although long-term storage has been recognized as a recurrent feature in hunter-gatherer societies (Ingold 1983; Testart 1982), with conclusive experimental work confirming this possibility (Cunningham 2005), the general applicability of this

hypothesis can still be questioned. Work on the V/Y-shaped hunting pits (*Schlitzgruben*), which integrates ethnographic and ethno-archaeological evidence, suggests that hunting, with a range of techniques and prey, is also a plausible use for such features. Moreover, these two functions are not necessarily exclusive: both have been proposed to explain the systems of pits known

since the Upper Palaeolithic on the Japanese archipelago (Sato 2010). Other functions are also possible, whether related to potential domestic or symbolic uses. As research progresses, observations of the increasing plurality of pit forms and their time range takes us further away from a single explanation for these pits.

While the function of these pits is clearly a key issue, the mere identification of these sites as a recurrent element in the Mesolithic landscape has in itself fundamental implications for understanding the social organization of these populations. By increasing the density and diversity of the site network, the recognition of these multiple systems of deep pits dramatically changes our perception of the pattern of Mesolithic occupation, which had previously been limited to evidence from sites with artefact scatters. The unexpected scale on which these pits have been dug certainly entails a more marked territoriality of Mesolithic populations than has commonly been observed up to now in inland northern France (Valdeyron 2008). Consistently, it suggests a more stable settlement pattern and a more complex social organization than the basic forager model that has generally been proposed (Séara *et al.* 2010).

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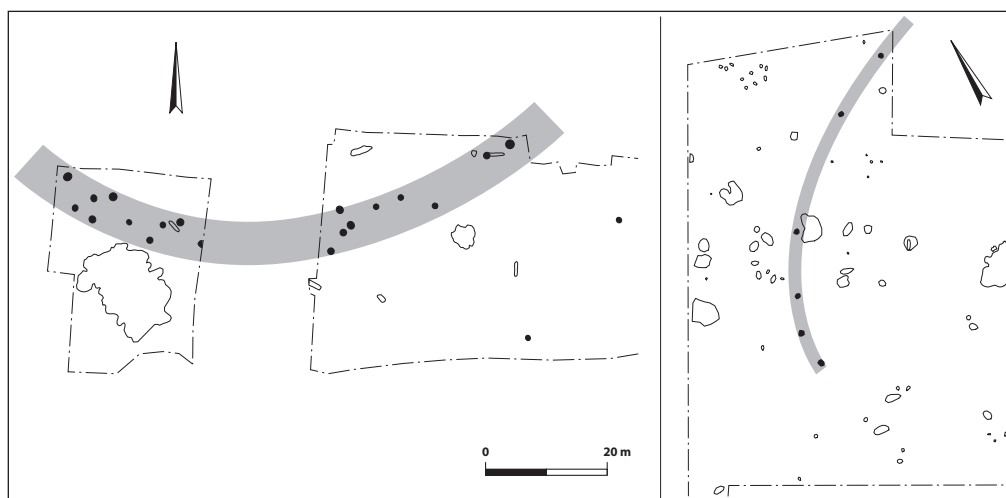


Fig. 29.5. Example of the linear distribution pattern of Mesolithic pits at the sites of Chouilly and Lesmont (Marne).

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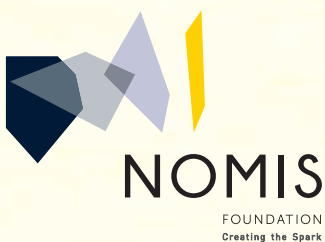
tion of settlements and dwelling spaces; the formation of regional identities expressed through various aspects of material culture and technologies of artefact production, use, and discard; aspects of social relations and mobility; symbolic, ritual, and mortuary practices; diverse ways in which Mesolithic communities of Europe were transformed into or superseded by Neolithic ways of being; and how we have researched, represented, and discussed the Mesolithic.

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Representing and Narrating
the Mesolithic



9