

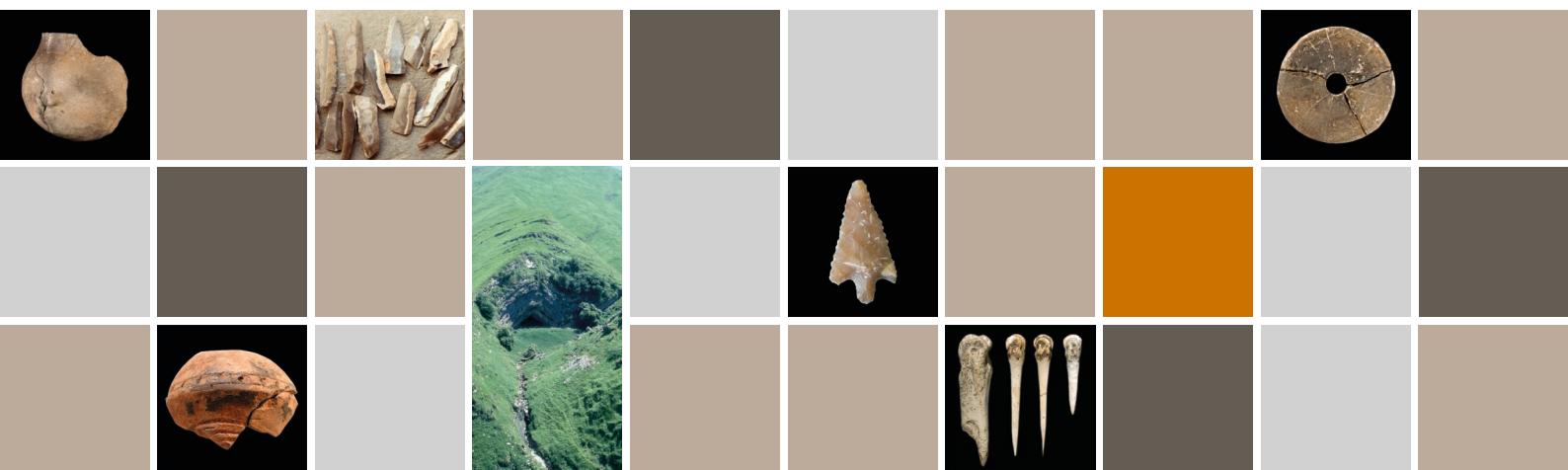


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## Layout

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## Cover

Fabien TESSIER

## The contributions should be addressed to:

REVUE P@LETHNOLOGIE

Vanessa LEA, Research associates

TRACES - UMR 5608 of the CNRS

Maison de la recherche  
5 allées Antonio Machado  
31058 Toulouse cedex 9, FRANCE

Phone: +33 (0)5 61 50 36 98

Fax: +33 (0)5 61 50 49 59

Email: [vanessa.lea@univ-tlse2.fr](mailto:vanessa.lea@univ-tlse2.fr)

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# ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE ALPINE NEOLITHIC: THE CASE OF THE MAURIENNE (SAVOIE – FRANCE)

Eric THIRAUT

## Abstract

In this paper, we question the significance of “Alpine” research on the Neolithic, applying both a theoretical and practical approach based on the example of the Maurienne valley (Savoie). The adjective “Alpine”, accompanied by that of “Neolithic”, might have only a geographic sense. We nonetheless believe that it makes an implicit reference to the “Alpine economy”, a concept developed by geographers to describe a modern economic system concentrated on the raising of bovids for the production of cheese. Though comparisons between the modern era and the Neolithic are dangerous, the concept of mobility seems to be a common point and a corollary of that of identity.

The necessity of a regional approach led us to conduct research in the high Maurienne, an east-west axial valley on the internal Alps. An ancient, relatively abundant documentation and fieldwork conducted by several volunteer archaeologists shows several occupation points in this territory between 500 and 1500 m in altitude, with a few points as high as 2200 m. The first dated occupations are attributed to the Vasi a Bocca Quadrata culture (2nd half of the Vth millennium BC), but it is not until the Final Neolithic that two excavated sites give insight into the settlement patterns. Information concerning the resources exploited by human groups is rich in this case and reveals regional markers. Therefore, rather than think of an Alpine Neolithic, we prefer to speak of a Neolithic occupation in the Alps.

**Key-words :** Alps, Neolithic, Maurienne, population, mobility

‘Choosing mountain regions as a field of investigation makes the work of the researcher more difficult because high lands are, more than other places, invested by the imagination. Leaving behind accepted images, finding the accumulated layers under the descriptions and documents, first requires the chipping away of urban fancies and the place assigned to regions at altitude in changing cosmographies and in the visions of those regions which often circulate below the consciousness of the researcher.’ (Fontane, 2003: 5).

Intended for historians of texts, the above is just as valid for those concerned with more remote periods: the prehistory of high places speaks equally to the imagination of researchers. In the case of the Alps, it suffices to bring to mind the ‘alpine Mousterian’ and its ‘cult of the bear’, or the emotion roused by the discovery 15 years ago of an ancient frozen corpse on the Similaun glacier. Something different can happen when one studies high lands and it is as well to circumscribe the possibility if research is to be established on a sound basis. (Beeching, 1999b, 2003). We attempt to do so in this contribution by delineating our methodology and our results in the Maurienne valley.

### **Issues: theory and practice**

Since the work of V. Gordon Childe, the Neolithic has classically been defined as a techno-economic stage of history: human beings acquire techniques of transforming living species for their profit; they herd animals and cultivate plants (Leroi-Gourhan, 1962). These techniques form part of a subsistence economy or ‘domestic mode of production’ (Sahlins, 1976). In detail and according to region, this process varies widely and, as a corollary, so do numerous transformation techniques, be they economic, social, medical or environmental. However, two aspects are of particular importance for western Europe: permanent settlement and the cultivation of cereals (Gallay, 1995b).

To this economic definition, applied to what is understood as a chronological period, was added a social dimension by the establishment of a connection

between the ‘Neolithic economy’ or ‘Neolithic stage’ and ‘primitive communism’ and certain forms of the “asian mode of production” as defined by Marxist thought (Collective, 1974). More recently, the adoption of a non-linear historical perspective has led to the serious weakening of the idea of egalitarian societies in favour of a dynamic vision in which local developments and unequal social relationships are put forward (Demoule, 1993, Constantin *et al.*, 1997, Pétrequin, 2002, Coudart *et al.*, 1999).

Finally, the concept of autosubsistence is strongly counterbalanced by the dynamics of exchange whose intensity and complexity have today been revealed by numerous studies. This is very well illustrated in the mineral world (for example, Binder and Perlès, 1990; Pétrequin, 2002; Ricq-de-Bouard and Fedele, 1993; Thirault, 2004b). Pastoralism also, which was identified through penning places such as shepherding caves (Brochier *et al.*, 1999; Brochier, 2005) induced, as yet poorly defined, patterns of mobility and complementarity between sites. The extent of the circulation of knowledge, know-how, goods and people, and even of abstract thought (Thirault, 2007), leads one to wonder if mobility was not structural during the Neolithic (thus bringing into question one of its presumed fundamentals: sedentarity: Beeching *et al.*, 2000; Beeching, 2003).

Embedded within this shifting conceptual framework, the delineation of an ‘alpine’ Neolithic goes back a long way (Dellenbach, 1935). Under the impetus of field spatial archeology initially carried out in the high valley of the Italian Adige (Bagolini, 1986, 1987), then in Swiss Valais, some models were proposed for testifying to an intrinsic specificity of the alpine Neolithic. Thus, for A Gallay, the Holocene peopling of Valais is related to an exploitation of the ecological potential of mountain environments (Gallay, 1983). More recently, the same author proposed a pattern of the neolithisation of Europe in six geographical, chronological and economic stages (Gallay, 1989, 2000). The neolithisation of the Alps, considered as a major barrier between the Mediterranean

Sea and the large continental basins of the Rhine and the Danube, would belong to the last stage marked by the progressive conquest of higher altitudes (Gallay's neo-pioneer phase), then a consolidation of settlement (phase of stabilisation and then of growth).

Other authors also tried to set up models. F. Fedele's proposals are close to those of A. Gallay (Fedele, 1976, 1979, 1999). A Bocquet has a more empirical approach but does not differ basically from his predecessors as to the progressive 'conquest' of alpine environments in the course of time (Bocquet, 1997). However, they place exchange networks at the very heart of their thought and thus effectively integrate in their schema the existence of intra-alpine kinds of mobility.

But how is the alpine Neolithic perceived as specific? It seems that this idea took shape as an implicit prolongation of another concept developed by historians, that of an 'alpine economy' (Arbos, 1922). It was developed from the study of the establishment of a pastoral economy based on the production of long-conservation cheeses (Gruyeres) designed for urban markets. Such an economy requires the large-scale herding of bovines and is made possible by the exploitation of the pasturage which exists at different altitudes at different times of the year in mountain regions. It can be augmented by developing grazing land in preference to crops and forests, thus modifying the altitudinal gradient of vegetation to increase food production. Cattle may then be put to grass at different altitudes according to the season and a part of the larger grazing surface can be mown for winter fodder. This 'high mountains' system, dominant but not always exclusive in the non-Mediterranean Alps, requires specific know-how. In particular, in the High Alps, the irrigation of grazing grounds and mown meadows allows an increase in the growth of grass during the dry periods of the year when the melt water of winter snows has run out. Whatever the land-holding and social formulae, this kind of pastoralism requires a mobile way of life during the course of the year, within the herding territory for the displacement of animals (alpage and

inalpage), but also sometimes outside (wintering in the low valleys and pasture at altitude of rented or bought animals in summer).

This system can be historically dated: it was set up at different periods from region to region according to urban development. In Savoy, for example, the preponderance of cattle herding over that of sheep appears at the end of XIV<sup>th</sup> and beginning of XV<sup>th</sup> centuries in Beaufortain (Viallet 1993). It is a capitalist exploitation within the framework of a market economy, which does not exclude the existence of whole sectors of subsistence economy. This type of pastoralism which fashioned sub-actual alpine landscapes and, in particular, the extensive high mountain pastures, has left a strong impression on both the erudite and the popular mentality, to the point of considering it, more or less implicitly, as an immutable reality. Thus, it seems to me, that the alpine Neolithic could have been conceived as the formative stage of this 'alpine economy' in a linear historical perspective leading from the 'primitive forest' to a state of nature, harmoniously arranged by human labour according to altitude.

However, an important nuance must be introduced here: the 'high mountains' system and the commercial production of 'gruyeres' did not develop everywhere in the Alps; other agrarian and/or pastoral systems existed simultaneously, implying other territorial and social organisations. The diversity of situations in medieval and modern times must thus encourage caution on possible models for earlier periods. In this very long perspective, we are far from the techno-economic capacities of the Neolithic and characterising prehistoric societies according to concepts applicable to the Middle Ages and to modern times is not the best way to proceed, even if a long diachronic approach may reveal economic evolutions (Sidi Maamar, 2000). Nevertheless, a fundamental given of historical alpine societies is their structurally mobile way of life (Granet-Abisset, 1997; Fontaine, 2003), of which I have shown the multiple facets (Thirault, 1999a).



I still believe that prehistorians would profit from reflecting more on this characteristic, all the more so in that recent French prehistoric alpine research, where it touches on mobility, mainly does so through material provenance studies .

Thus the CIRCALP programme was the occasion to arouse or to revitalise enquiry into the physical characterisation of materials, to seek the sources of supply and to question their social significance (Beeching ed., 1999). Work on pre-alpine resources (flint), but also rock crystal and hard rocks for polishing, has largely profited from the implication of several young researchers. Let us mention the work of C. Riche and C. Bressy on flints (Bressy, 2003; Riche, 1999; Pelegrin *et al.*, 1999; Affolter *et al.*, 1999), of S. Cousseran and V. Brisotto on hyaline quartz (Brisotto, 1999; Cousseran, 1999, 2000) and our own research on hard-grained rocks intended for axe blades, arrowheads and ornament (Thirault *et al.*, 1999; Thirault, 2004b, 2005). Moreover, the alpine issues surrounding resource circulation are part of movements of a broader range, as is shown by the debates around the long polished blades in alpine rocks and their circulation in Europe (Cordier and Bocquet, 1998; Klassen, 2002; Pétrequin *et al.*, 2002, 2003; Thirault *ibid.*).

The question of alpine identities is not new: the north-alpine and lemanic distribution of burials of the Chamblandes type during the middle Neolithic is an undeniable fact (4800-3300 cal. BC; Gallay, 1977; Baudais and Kramar, 1990; Bocquet, 1997; Moinat and Chambon ed., 2006), while, during the final Neolithic (third millennium cal. BC), the anthropomorphic steles from Sion (Switzerland) and Aoste (Italy) show a strong conceptual community between Valais and the Valley of Aoste (Gallay, 1995a; Mezzena, 1997; Bazzanella and Marchi, 1995). More recently, cultural identities and the circulation of ideas and people have been apprehended via certain types of arrowhead (Durand, 1999; Thirault, 2004a) or of ceramics (Beeching, 1999a, 2002). In the same manner, a mobile way of life has been inferred from the recognition of caves as

being used as sheep folds whose extent and chronology are variable according to region (cf. *supra*). For the French Pre-alps, a threshold is effective in the middle Neolithic; in the interior Alps, the data only go back to the final Neolithic but the documentation is very scarce (Balmes site in Sollières: Brochier *et al.*, 1999). These studies show clearly that circulation and identity differ from one area to another in the interior Alps, and this from the middle Neolithic onwards. If it is not possible to determine alpine particularisms for the Neolithic, neither is it possible to speak about an *alpine* Neolithic in an overall way (Beeching, 2003)

### **The Maurienne: a choice**

This long preamble aims at determining the relevance of a properly alpine interrogation concerning recent prehistory. I believe that a global approach is no longer effective and that it is now necessary to work on a more restricted scale - massif, valley, micro-region - in order to establish a tight grid of archeological documents within a homogenous geographical framework (Beeching and Brochier eds., 1994; Beeching and Brochier, in press). A too loose grid of spatial and temporal data undermines the coherence of the analysis. The problem is the same for pollinic studies, often called upon in debates on anthropisation. They provide invaluable but localised data and presently do not support a satisfactory evolutive models of plant cover and its anthropisation in the Alps. Only the multiplication of analyses on a tightened territorial grid and according to altitudinal gradients, as in the Pyrenees, will allow progress on this point (Gallup *et al.*, 2003). We think that the return to the archaeological field must be conducted in circumscribed spaces and that it should be carried out in depth and in the long term. Archaeological research is a slow process, especially in a mountain context where the sites are slipping away under the footprints of the prospectors. Based on the above principles, any place is appropriate for the project of establishing how mountain environments were peopled during the Holocene.

Our research led us to pay the greatest attention to the systems of production, exchange and the use of goods in the Western Alps, in particular for axe blades (Thirault,

2004b). In this field, the intra-alpine valleys and reliefs are of great informative potential but suffer from a documentary deficit. This observation led us to choose the Maurienne as a field study following encounters and opportunities which it is irrelevant to specify here (fig. 1)

However, let us remind ourselves of what the Maurienne is (fig. 2):

- a large valley which, from east to west, drains the waters of the Arc (a tributary of the Isere) basin for more than 120 km;
- a deep notch in the high alpine metamorphic relief between Belledonne in the west, Vanoise in the north, Gran Paradiso in the east and Oisans in the south;
- an axis of circulation between the outlying Savoyard regions and the watershed of the basin of the Po whose valleys drop rapidly away towards the east on the Italian slope
- a valley which borders the northern limit of Mediterranean influences and which was sometimes reached by the Provencal transhumances at the moment of their greatest extension.

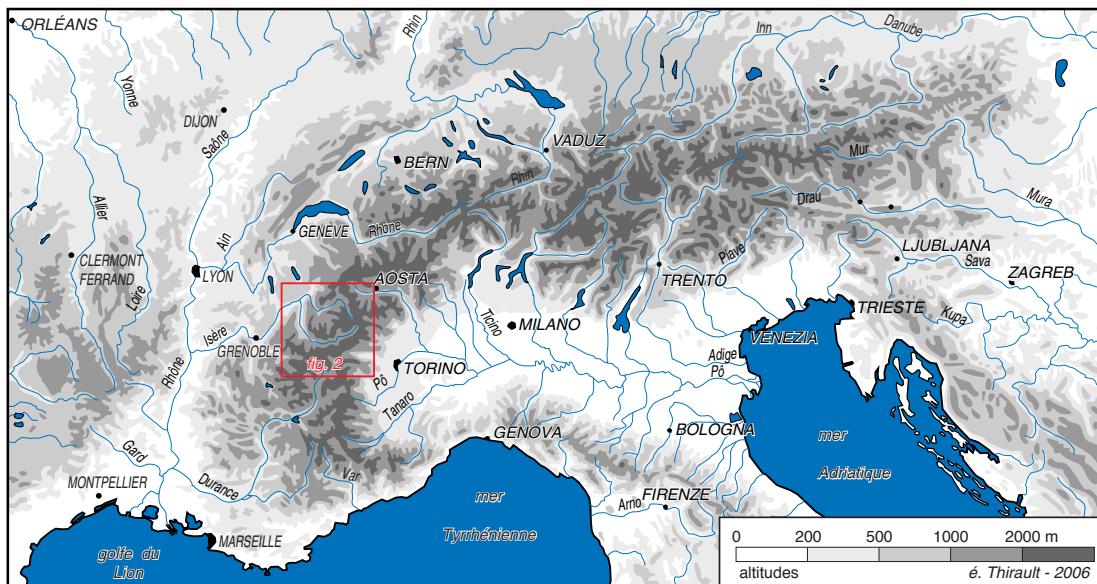
In short, the Maurienne is a large-scale transect between the Rhone Valley lowlands and the transalpine passes, between the continental and the Mediterranean Alps.

The compass of a question centred on the Neolithic,

therefore, largely exceeds the regional framework. Establishing the ways in which the Maurienne was populated should result in documenting the bonds, the thresholds and the borders on both sides of the alpine chain, as much between west and east as between north and south, between cultures resulting from the Mediterranean neolithisation and those belonging to the Danubian sphere, between central and western Europe.

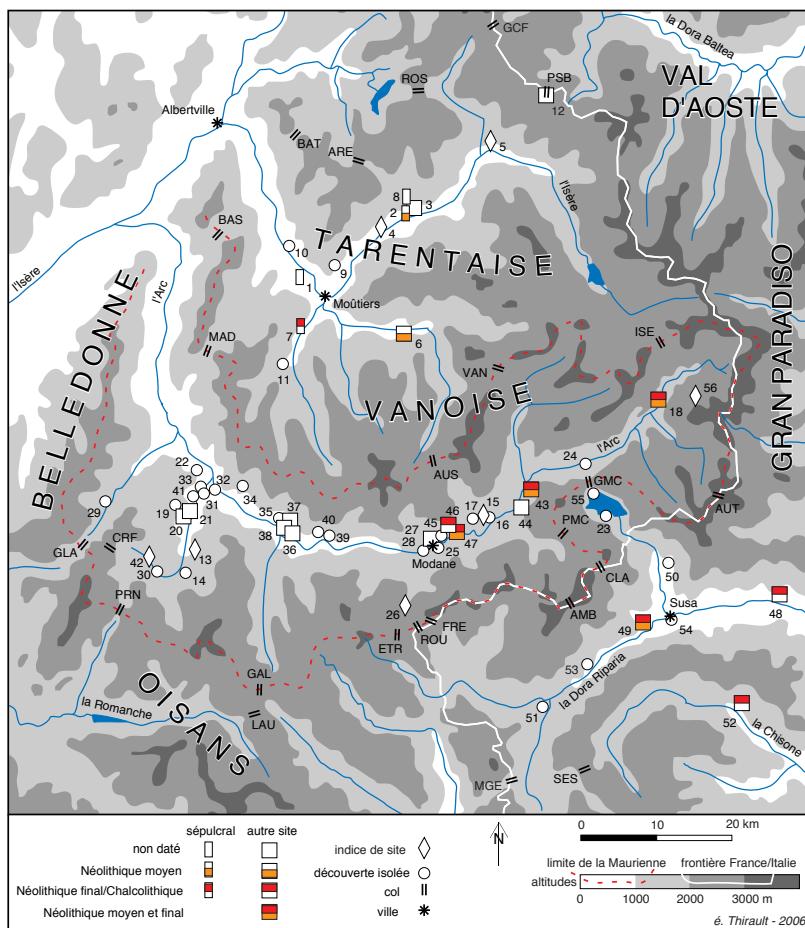
### The Maurienne: history of research covering the Neolithic era

A history of research in the two large alpine valleys of Maurienne and Tarentaise already existed (Rey, 1999; Rey and Thirault, 1999; fig. 2). Concerning the Maurienne, three facts should be remembered: a long-standing activity of prospection which had resulted in many discoveries compared with other alpine areas (37 points), but a notable deficiency of proven Neolithic sites (11); the activity of amateur and voluntary archeologists, including the only Neolithic excavation organised before the end of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, that of Les Balmes in Sollières; widely scattered sources of information whose strongest point is the presence of Neolithic sites and indices from the bottom of the valley up to high altitudes (approximately 2200 m).



**fig. 1 :** The Maurienne, a valley crossing the western Alps.





**fig. 2 :** Distribution map of Neolithic findings in Maurienne, Tarentaise and high valley of Suse, from Rey and Thirault 1999, actualized for Maurienne.

Mentioned passes : AMB : Ambin pass (2899 m) ; ARE : Cormet d'Arêches (2109 m) ; AUS : Aussois pass (2916 m) ; AUT : Autaret pass (3072 m) ; BAS : Basmont pass (1791 m) ; BAT : La Bathie pass (1992 m) ; CLA : Clapier pass (2477 m) ; CRF : La Croix de Fer pass (2068 m) ; ETR : pass of La Vallée Etroite (2434 m) ; FRE : pass of Fréjus (2540 m) ; GAL : Galibier pass (3642 m) ; GCF : Grand Col Ferret (2537 m) ; GLA : Glandon pass (1924 m) ; GMC : pass of grand Mont-Cenis (2083 m) ; ISE : Iseran pass (2762 m) ; LAU : Le Lautaret pass (2057 m) ; MAD : La Madeleine pass (1993 m) ; MGE : pass of Montgenèvre (1850 m) ; PRN : pass of Les Prés Nouveaux (2290 m) ; PMC : pass of Le Petit Mont-Cenis (2183 m) ; PSB : pass of Le Petit Saint-Bernard (2188 m) ; ROS : Cormet de Roselend (1968 m) ; ROU : La Roue pass (2541 m) ; SES : pass of Sestrière (2033 m) ; VAN : pass of La Vanoise (2515 m).

List of findings (for the references, cf. Rey et Thirault 1999). Tarentaise : 1. Aigueblanche «Bellecombe». 2. Aime «Le Replat». 3. Aime «Saint-Sigismond». 4. Aime «Villlette». 5. Bourg-Saint-Maurice «Le Châtelard». 6. Bozel «Les Moulins/Chenêt des Pierres». 7. Fontaine-le-Puits, dans le village. 8. Granier. 9. Hautecour «Le Villard d'Hautecour». 10. La Léchère «Notre-Dame-de-Briançon». 11. Saint-Jean-de-Belleville. 12. Seez «col du Petit Saint-Bernard». Maurienne : 13. Albiez-Montrond «Albiez-le-Vieux». 14. Albiez-Montrond «Montrond». 15. Aussois «Le Coin». 16. Aussois «Les Lozes». 17. Aussois «Marie-Christine». 18. Bessans «Le Château». 19. Fontcouverte-la-Toussuire «Comborsière». 20. Fontcouverte-la-Toussuire, maison Bouttaz. 21. Fontcouverte-la-Toussuire «Pierra Grala». 22. Jarrier, défilé de Pontamafrey. 23. Lanslebourg, rive sud du lac du Mont-Cenis. 24. Lanslevillard, au pied du col du Mont-Cenis. 25. Modane. 26. Modane «Le Lavoir». 27. Modane «Loutraz». 28. Saint-André. 29. Saint-Colomban-les-Villards «Combe du Tepey». 30. Saint-Jean-d'Arves. 31 et 32. Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne. 33. Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne «Grandes Terres». 34. Saint-Julien-Montdenis. 35. Saint-Martin-la-Porte. 36. Saint-Martin-la-Porte, col de Porte. 37. Saint-Martin-la-Porte «grotte des Charmettes». 38. Saint-Martin-la-Porte «grotte de Vulliermet». 39. Saint-Michel-de-Maurienne. 40. Saint-Michel-de-Maurienne «La Buffaz». 41. Saint-Pancrace. 42. Saint-Sorlin-d'Arves. 43. Sollières-Sardières «Les Balmes», cave and shelf. 44. Sollières-Sardières «abri du Châtel». 45. Villarodin-le-Bourget «Amodon». 46. Villarodin-le-Bourget «Chatalamia». 47. Villarodin-le-Bourget «Rocher des Amoureux». Val Susa et Val Chisone : 48. Chianocco «Orrido». 49. Chiomonte «La Maddalena». 50. Novalaise. 51. Oulx. 52. Roreto «Balm'Chanto». 53. Salbertrand. 54. Susa. New sites in Maurienne : 55. Lanslebourg, rive du lac du Mont-Cenis : an axe blade discovered accidentally (oral information J.-C. Ozanne). 56 : Bonneval-sur-Arc «Belle Côte» : a possible rough-out axe blade (Rey 1999, Thirault 2004b).

Our field-work was initiated following the discovery of a Neolithic site by J.-C. Ozanne in Bessans at the bottom of the valley at an altitude of 1750m, in which polished arrowheads in serpentinites and amphibolites were produced (Rey and Thirault, 1999; Thirault, 2004a). However, we quickly realised that the problems of the exploitation of hard-grained rock materials would not lead to a satisfactory account of how the area was settled. We therefore widened our area of study by carrying out a complete diagnosis of the site of Le Rocher du Chateau in Bessans (1997, 2002, 2003) completed by thematic prospections throughout the middle and high Maurienne valley (1988) or, more specifically, on the basin of Bessans (1977 and since 2004). The last operation aims to document the first settlement of an oasis at altitude: the plain of Bessans (1700 -1800 m) and neighbouring reliefs (up to 3000 m for summits exceeding 3500 m), by surface prospections and systematic surveys of the potential sites. This operation, authorised for the period 2004 to 2006, is not completed yet and the results are preliminary. Moreover, in 2005, the opening of a forest road was the occasion of an intervention at Balmes in Sollières which relaunched the issues studies on this site (monograph to be edited by P. Benamour and J. Vital). We must specify that these operations are carried out with the assistance of voluntary teams, thanks to the financial support of the Ministry of Culture, the Council General of Savoy and the Vanoise National Park, modest subsidies supplemented by the logistic help of the Centre for Prehistoric Archaeology at Valence (UMR 5138 of CNRS).

### The first Holocene settlement in the Maurienne: what do we know?

The map and the inventory published in 1999 have not undergone significant modifications (fig. 2). The distribution of sites and of isolated discoveries shows concentrations of which the archeological relevance is not certain. We find an absence of examples in the lower Maurienne and concentrations in the valley of Arves, around Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne and Saint-michel-de-Maurienne, as well as between Modane and Sollières, with altitudes ranging from 500m to 1500m.

Further to the east, the site of Le Chateau in Bessans remains isolated (1750m). In addition to these lower-lying discoveries are indications at higher altitude, between 2000m and 2200m, distributed on the southern slope of the Maurienne and underlining the importance of circulation at high altitudes and the frequentation of passes: the three passes of Frejus, of La Roue and of La Vallee Etroite, the saddle of Mont-Cenis and the sector of the sources of the Arc.

To date, only five Neolithic sites have been the subject of more thorough work. Two of them, Le Rocher des Amoureaux in Villarodin and the shelter of Chatel at Sollières, were discovered during excavations carried out by J.-C. Ozanne on protohistoric occupations and remain largely unpublished (Aubin ed., 1997; Ozanne, 1992, 1994) The presence of the middle and final Neolithic is attested. Les Balmes in Sollières was revealed in 1972 by R. Chemin, and excavations were carried out successively by R. Chemin, F. Ballet, P. Benamour, then J. Vital until 1994 (Benamour, 1993; Brochier *et al.*, 1999). Several phases of the final Neolithic are attested. In 2005 we carried out an intervention on the shelf adjacent to the cave and confirmed an open-air occupation during the final Neolithic at an altitude of 1350m. In Bessans (fig. 3), following a series of surveys in the shelter of Le Chateau (1750m), formerly known for its wall-paintings (figs. 5 and 6), we were able to establish a sequence of occupation overing the middle and final Neolithic with great documentary richness of the paleoenvironment and its exploitation by Man (Thirault, to be published; Thirault and Pallier, to be published). Lastly, the site of Chatalamia in Villarodin, perched on a promontory above Modane at approximately 1500m of altitude, has been the subject of surface surveys since 1998 (fig. 7). A Neolithic occupation is attested, at least for the end of the period.

Insofar as the study and the publication of the excavated sites are still underway and the new projects are not completed (surface surveys in Bessans), it is difficult to propose strong interpretive patterns over the Neolithic





**fig. 3 :** The plain of Bessans seen from North. Le Rocher du Château is located in the centre of the photography, in the bottom of the valley. Photography by the author.

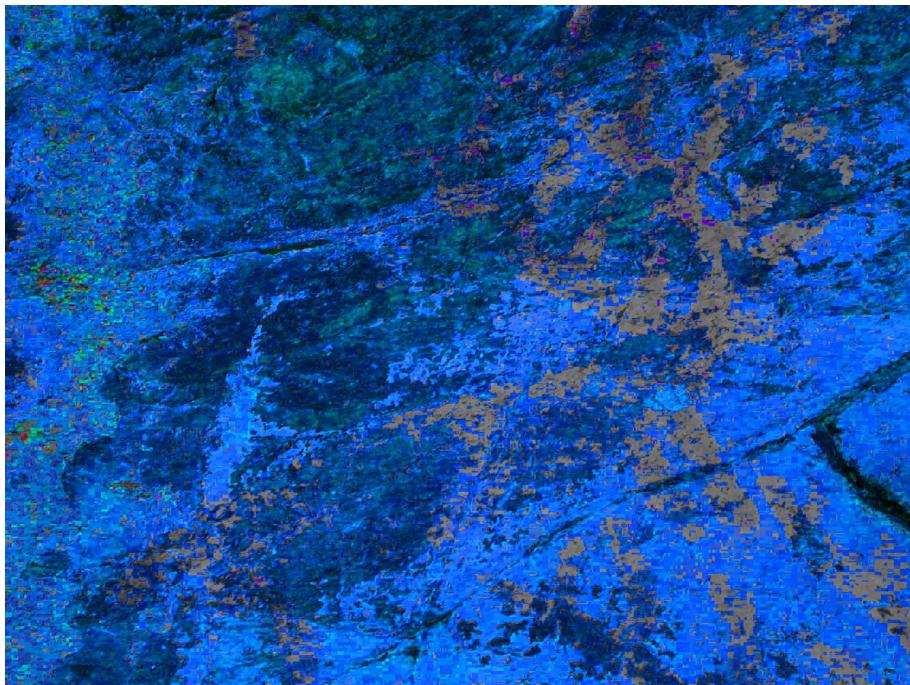


**fig. 4 :** Le Rocher du Château in Bessans seen from North. The Neolithic site occupies the bottom of the rock face directed to the East. Photography by the author.



**fig. 5** : Le Château in Bessans. A detail of the deer panel, painted in red. Photography taken by the author in 2004.

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**fig. 6** : Le Château in Bessans. The same detail of the deer panel, after working on colours in order to set the painting off well.



**fig. 7 :** The site of Chatalamia in Villardonin-Le Bourget. The Neolithic settlement is located on the rock which stands out from the side, at an altitude of 1500 m. Photography by the author.

period in the Maurienne. It is nevertheless possible to specify some advances made in our knowledge of this field, evidence for which is published elsewhere or is soon to be published.

First, when was the Maurienne peopled? To date, no site irrefutably earlier than the Neolithic is known but, given the chronology of alpine deglaciation, it cannot be ruled out that human groups penetrated into the valley during the Tardiglacial or the ancient Holocene, i.e. the final Paleolithic and the Mesolithic. The early Neolithic is also absent. The oldest proven occupation is that of Le Chateau in Bessans, towards the eastern limit, and is connected with the Italian culture of Vasi a Bocca Quadrata (VBQ - Square-mouthed Pottery Culture: Thirault, to be published). The dating of these occupations is not yet firmly established but it falls in the course of the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium cal. BC. At this period there is a strong VBQ influence in the Maurienne and it would be useful to delimit the geographic extent of this phenomenon. Be that as it may, these data are to be linked to the existence of VBQ settlements (phase 2 of the Italian chronology) in the adjacent Piedmontese valleys (Fozzati and

Bertone, 1984; Venturino Gambari, 1998) and in the Tarentaise on the site of Moulins/Chenet des Pierres in Bozel and Dos de Borgaz in Aime (Rey, 2006, 2007). Beyond the intra-alpine valleys, VBQ impact is well established in Swiss Valais and in the French Alps as far as the Rhone, but it is documented only by ceramics (Bazzanella, 1997; Beeching *et al.*, 1997; Beeching, 1999a, 2003). The nature of the VBQ presence in France is far from uniform. In the interior Alps it consists of occupations of the VBQ culture itself, whereas in the pre-Alps and the valley of the Rhone it is limited to influences which can be seen in ceramic forms and techniques (Beeching, 1999). A more recent phase of the middle Neolithic in French terminology, or Neolitico recente in Italian terminology, appears to be present in the Maurienne, but in a much less certain way, at Bessans/Le Chateau (arrowheads similar to those of the Southern Chassey Culture; Thirault, to be published). On the other hand, the end of the Neolithic is represented in the five sites mentioned, the status of which shows the functional diversity of the settlements: shepherding cave and probable open-air settlement in Balmes in Sellieres, repeated passages in the shelter of Le Chateau in Bessans.

The function of the sites is still subject to scrutiny, more especially as the two excavations at Bessans and Sollières are the subject of multidisciplinary studies which are not yet completed but which are highly promising. Nevertheless, we note that the VBQ occupation of Bessans is certainly not perennial, which implies that this site is part of a broader territorial network including the nearer Piedmontese valleys just beyond the passes. For the final Neolithic, a link appears through lithic resources: production of polished arrowheads at Bessans (Thirault, 2004a), exploitation of the fine-grain quartzites at Chatalamia. In this projection, Balmes de Sollières could represent a perennial settlement at a new altitude for the period (1350m).

The question of resources and their appropriation by man thus appears fundamental to an understanding of the first intra-alpine settlement: animal, vegetable, but also lithic resources. Thus, a local focus joins a more global analysis of the mountain region since, for example, the three sites presented above furnish evidence of the production of axe blades in eclogite and omphacitite rock originating from nearby Piedmontese deposits. In one way or another, these sites belong to the circle of producers of such tools intended for an intense circulation from the VBQ towards the west (Thirault 2004b).

### Perspectives

The process by which the Maurienne was peopled during the Holocene is far from being known with desired precision. Nevertheless, the first results serve to invalidate the earlier conceptual framework which took for granted a certain chronological linearity in the ‘conquest’ of intra-alpine zones, a term to which we prefer that of peopling. Thus, if the Neolithic period in the Alps is as rich and complex as everywhere else, the identifying alpine characteristics are increasingly visible from the middle Neolithic onwards. But, for all that, they are as much *regional* as *alpine* markers so they cannot, of themselves, be the basis of the alpine Neolithic.

We must repeat: it is imperative to return to the field to document in a precise way, on a local and regional scale, the evolutive sequences of the Neolithic. It is a long-term initiative, ungrateful and fragile in the current context of the hardening of science to the advantage of disciplines claimed to be more ‘scientific’ or more useful, in any case more rapid, in their protocols and their results than social sciences can possibly be.

### Nota bene

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### Author

#### Eric THIRAUT

Membre Associé UMR 5608 du CNRS  
TRACES  
ericthirault@hotmail.com

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