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Jean Guilaine talks on Western Mediterranean networks in the Neolithic Age



"There is a Neolithic inheritance in us all"

Jean Guilaine is French archaeologist, expert in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. Guilaine has dedicated over 50 years to excavations throughout the Mediterranean, an activity he combines with lectures as honorary professor of Collège de France. In February Guilaine participated in the "First Conference on Networks in the Neolithic: Circulation and Exchange of Raw Materials, Products and Ideas in the Western Mediterranean (7th to 3rd millennium BCE)", organised by the Department of Prehistory of Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and the Gavà Mines Archaeological Park. UAB Divulga had the opportunity to interview him. Meticulous researcher and passionate communicator, Guilaine talked about the latest hypotheses on Neolithic societies and how new analysis techniques of materials have contributed to further knowledge.

Jean Guilaine is a renowned French archaeologist. Professor of Collège de France, Guilaine has over 50 years of experience in research of European civilisations during the Neolithic and Bronze Age. He has been awarded several distinctions for his work including the Grand Prix of Archaeology by the French Ministry of Culture. He also is Knight of Arts and Letters, of the National Merit and of the Legion of Honour of France. Guilaine has published over 500 articles and some twenty monographs and books, and also has an extensive filmography as director and collaborator in documentaries.

Curriculum vitae

- What are Neolithic networks?

- During the Neolithic Age circulation routes were created which permitted the exchange of materials, objects and ideas between different communities. They could be small scaled or reach up to thousands of kilometres in distance. For example, we have models of polished axes manufactured in the Alps which can be found in Nicosia, the Iberian Peninsula and Bulgaria. These supply networks between different communities, which could include useful material such as flint for tool building, deforestation or for the creation of crop fields, as well as symbolic elements to indicate social status. Many types of materials and elements moved around, but now we can also know how they circulated. This allows us to reconstruct not only material objects but also the social realities of the period. Studying serve to learn more about societies of that period.

- What were societies like in the Neolithic Age?

- In the past years we've been able to progress greatly thanks to new technologies in the analysis of materials and biological remains. This has given us a new perspective on the first agricultural societies. There was the belief that these societies were closed entities, economically autarchic and self-sufficient. Now we have discovered that they exchanged materials and objects through these circulation routes located in different corners of Europe, and that they interacted commercially and socially.

- How have these new analysis technologies helped to increase archaeological knowledge?

- Since the second half of the 20th century, when the techniques were first used, we archaeologists have better knowledge of these phenomena. There are techniques to help us characterise materials, such as mineralogy and petrography, with which we can know exactly where a material production site is located. Starting from here we can learn about which areas the materials were distributed to. For example, polished axes of the Piedmont region can be found in Varna, on the Black Sea coast, thousands of kilometres away, buried in the tombs of leaders from that period. Other important tools used are chemical and genetic analyses, with which we can verify if the communities originated in that area or if they came from afar and settled there; and chronological analyses such as radiocarbon dating which allow us to know from which era a specific object is.

- Are there similarities between those societies and modern ones?

- Of course, there is a Neolithic inheritance in us all. Urbanised societies emerged at that time.

During the Neolithic Age man dominates nature, contrary to what occurred during the Palaeolithic Age. Agriculture and livestock farming is invented, as much food as wanted can be produced and there is control of resource distribution. At the same time we find the first social inequalities, an elite society emerges, etc. It is the beginning of our historical world.

- Including violence.

- For a long time there was the theory that in the Palaeolithic Age the world seemed to be a peaceful paradise and that it was in the Neolithic that violence emerged, with capitalisation and the creation of wealth. Some researchers were able to demonstrate that this hypothesis was influenced by philosophical and religious beliefs and that conflicts between individuals and communities also existed in the Palaeolithic Age. Actually, violence is not constitutive of any one society, it is consubstantial to the human species when conditions warrant it.

- Is imagination a must in order to be an archaeologist?

- Not necessarily. An archaeologist compiles data and after having observed and described them, he or she must interpret the information. French historian George Duby used to say that "when I look at medieval maps and texts I have a skeleton. I need to add the skin and since that's what I don't have, I create it." This in some manner illustrates the work of archaeologists. However, thanks to scientific progress, our analyses are more and more precise and we can formulate more reliable hypotheses.

- Can studying such an ancient period have an effect on contemporary history?

- There are two ways of making history, by specialising in one specific period or taking on a more global perspective. I believe historians must follow the second option. For me, history of man begins with hominisation up until modern days. It is an idea into which educational programmes need to be integrated, in order to have a global vision of the history of man and not limit it to one specific moment in history, such as finding a starting point in the invention of writing. This has traditionally been the viewpoint, but it is a false one. Because when writing first appeared, it represented serious limitations. It implied that those who knew how to write were in power and the rest of society was left out of the system. We must have a globalised and globalising vision of the history of man.

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