

Hidden Landscapes of Mediterranean Europe. Cultural and Methodological Biases in Pre- and Protohistoric

Mid fourth-millennium copper mining in Liguria, north-west Italy: the earliest known copper mines in Western Europe

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This paper presents twelve new radiocarbon dates from copper mines at Monte Loreto in Liguria, northwest Italy, which indicate that extraction began around 3500 cal BC, making these the earliest copper mines to be discovered in Western Europe so far. The dates are placed in their regional context, with a discussion of results from Libiola and other sites associated with early copper mining.

Keywords: Copper Age, Italy, Liguria, early mining, copper metallurgy

Introduction

Our understanding of the origins of copper metallurgy in Europe has developed somewhat since Renfrew (1969, 1970: 306-8, figure 10) posited independent origins for copper working in the Balkans and in the Iberian Peninsula. One key issue that has emerged is the distinction between the circulation of copper artefacts, what Skeates (1994) has defined as the 'early metal-using horizon', and the actual mining of copper ores for the manufacture of artefacts. Thus small numbers of metal artefacts already occur in Italian late Neolithic contexts: for example, an awl found in the Arene Candide cave (Finale Ligure, Savona province) may be dated to 4000 cal BC or earlier and seems to be made of native copper (Campana & Franceschi 1997).

Evidence for prehistoric copper mining was reported in the nineteenth century at a number of sites in Liguria, north-west Italy, notably by the geologist and pioneer of prehistoric research, Issel (1879, 1892: 4-6). In this paper we present twelve new radiocarbon dates obtained from recent excavations carried out by an international team at one of these – the copper mines at Monte Loreto (Castiglione Chiavarese, Genoa province) (see Table 1). The dates, obtained mostly from young-wood charcoal, document actual copper extraction (rather than just metal use) from around 3500 cal BC, making these the earliest copper mines discovered in Western Europe so far. Our excavations at Monte Loreto have documented

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