

Exploring the coast, sounding out the past: the methods and practices of maritime prehistory

International workshop (IRN PrehCOAST / French Prehistoric Society)

Organizers: Grégor Marchand, Yvan Pailler and Pierre Stéphan

Location: University of Brest / IUEM

Period: May 4 and 5, 2020, followed by an excursion on May 6 to the Molène archipelago



Rescue archaeology on the shore of Soulac-sur-Mer (Gironde; photo: Florence Verdin)

When prehistoric archaeology dips a toe cautiously into the sea, it starts to lose sight of its landmarks. Human occupation at the interface between the maritime and landward domains is a complex research topic that can be hard to grasp, for three reasons. First and foremost, the position of the coastline has fluctuated over time as a result of marine transgressions, erosion, sedimentary inputs or isostatic recovery. Revealing these habitats and other traces of human activity on the foreshore requires a wide range of techniques that is constantly evolving: geophysical surveys, Lidar, coring, etc.

Secondly, the multiplicity of environmental domains that people exploited means that a very wide range of archaeological and archaeozoological evidence is left behind, requiring a wide range of approaches. The study of mammals, fish, birds and shellfish enhances our knowledge and provides a better understanding of how the natural cycles - seasons or tides – were managed (or rather, adapted to) by fishermen and by agro-pastoralist communities. Particular attention needs to be paid to the interdisciplinary nature of the investigation, and to the differing time-frames involved in acquiring different kinds of data. The degree to which this work can be intermeshed will determine the success or failure of these scientific programmes.

Thirdly, prehistoric coastal settlement should not be regarded as a kind of tightrope walk on the edge of an ecotone, but rather as the starting point of economic and social networks that extend far into the land beyond the coast, as well as linking coastal areas: for example, some whalebone paddles or shell ornaments ended up far inland, travelling along such networks. Once again, the study of these artefacts involves the use of state-of-the-art scientific methods.

Finally, we cannot ignore the regulatory aspects that weigh on archaeological and Paleoenvironmental interventions in coastal environments: the diversity of regulations on human or natural heritage and the multiplicity of institutional stakeholders can generate significant bottlenecks in research, even though marine erosion continues in its unrelenting way.

The workshop "**Exploring the coast, sounding out the past: methods and practices of maritime prehistory**" therefore offers a comprehensive assessment of these new methods of exploring prehistoric habitats in the maritime domain, opening up scientific perspectives. This meeting, which focuses on the methodological and technical aspects of prehistoric coastal land use – a topic that is currently undergoing a transformation in our understanding of it – also aims to address the heritage, ecological and political problems encountered by scientific research when dealing with prehistoric societies on the world's coasts.

This international round table is supported by the European Research Network (IRN) project "Coastal-inland dynamics in prehistoric hunter-gatherer societies" (PrehCOAST), supported by the Institut Ecologie et Environnement of CNRS since January 2019. It also benefits from the scientific dynamics of the ArMeRIE programme (Maritime Archaeology and Interdisciplinary Environmental Research) and the "Brest-Iroise" Workshop Zone (LTSER France).

The language of the event will be English. Proposals for papers (only in English) should be sent to:
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Other information on the site of the French Prehistoric Society
<http://www.prehistoire.org/>