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The role of small prey in Neanderthal contexts: the case of Teixoneres Cave (MIS 3, Barcelona, Spain)

The exploitation of small prey through prehistory has been an intensely discussed topic over the past few decades. Although some cases of the systematic procurement of small prey were documented during the Middle Pleistocene, it was not until the Late Upper Pleistocene that the human diet saw this important change. Notwithstanding, small animal bones, such as those of leporids and birds, are commonly found at many archaeological sites, and they could include evidence of both Neanderthal and other small predator activities. These alternated hominid-carnivore occupational dynamics make difficult to discern and/or isolate archaeological events within archaeological units. This is the case at Teixoneres Cave (Barcelona, Spain), where human occupations are combined with those conducted by carnivores. In this line, the main goal of the present work is to unveil the main accumulator agents, as well as possible secondary agents, involved in this Middle Paleolithic site. To achieve this objective, the bone remains of small prey (leporids and birds) from unit III (>51,000 to 40,610 ^{14}C BP) were analyzed using a zooarchaeological perspective and applying the principles of analysis from taphonomy. The results of our study show that small prey inputs have been generated by a mix of contributions in the site, in which small mammal carnivores and nocturnal raptors seem to play an important role –while leporids were occasionally introduced into the human diet, birds do not seem to be of interest to them. As shown in previous studies (Rufà et al., 2014, 2016; Rosell et al., 2017), diversified procurement strategies are found at Teixoneres Cave, where humans focus their activities on large fauna in the site and, occasionally, on leporid specimens. Additionally, the high incidence of small prey predators reinforces the general position that hominins made use of the cave during short-term occupations. The present research adds to our knowledge of human subsistence strategies carried out in this specific scenario and, thus, to better comprehend human dynamics of occupation in archaeological sites, and how they have significantly influenced the faunal record.

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