

Change in the later second millennium BC: plants, pots, and people

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A conference focusing on millet in prehistory might seem an unusual and rather narrowly focused event. Why just millet? What has it got to do with humans and their culture? Can this (to us) little known crop really have carried such importance that we are proposing to spend a couple of days talking about it?

In fact millet was one of a number of crops that came into prominence during the second half of the second millennium BC. I and others have pointed to some of the characteristics which might have been relevant to its relatively sudden rise to fame, such as its short growing season and tolerance of tough growing conditions, such as drought. It is possible to argue that the new range of crops entering the diet in the Middle to Late Bronze Age – entering, not replacing existing crops – indicates an intensification of food production, perhaps to be connected with increasing or changing population.

The latter centuries of the second millennium were in any case remarkable for the major changes that came about over the course of the period. While recent genetic studies have focused largely on earlier times (particularly the Eneolithic), showing that the population of Europe changed dramatically in the third millennium, during the second the picture seems to be largely one of genetic continuity from the third. Yet archaeologically major changes were afoot: the appearance of cremation burial around 1300 BC, for instance, in the upheaval known as the Urnfield period, along with an associated material culture that was remarkably homogeneous across large parts of Europe. Furthermore, it appears that something major happened in the period 3100-2900 BP, to judge from the very large number of radiocarbon dates that have been obtained from sites in that time bracket (roughly 14th to 12th centuries cal BC) – and much less so from the centuries before or after. The evidence of conflict and violence (Velim, Tollense valley), and the abundance of weaponry, add to the appearance of changing times.

While it is not possible to show, and is in any case inherently unlikely, that the plant repertoire underwent a change that corresponded closely with these cultural events, taken in the round it is certainly true that the rise of millet and other cultivars, hitherto much less popular, can be taken as an important aspect of the changing human and cultural landscape in these crucial centuries.