

**An Overview of Archaeological Research on the Early Neolithic in Albania****Archaeology**

**Keywords:** Early Neolithic, history of research, Albania, cultural evaluations, chronology.

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**Abstract**

An intensive research on the Neolithic and Neolithisation process in Albania was conducted during the second half of the past century. The isolation of the country during the communist regime made impossible the cooperation with other foreign research institutions, as well as the use of other applications of advanced equipment and methods, therefore the result of the studies were limited. In addition, the evaluations and studies on the prehistory period were focused mainly on typological and cultural analysis of the archaeological assemblage. After 1990, the interdisciplinary research on the Prehistory period has provided new data on the economic and social life of communities that have lived in the territory of Albania. On the other side the radiocarbon dates shed new light on the beginning of Neolithisation process and the development of the new Neolithic way of life.

**Introduction**

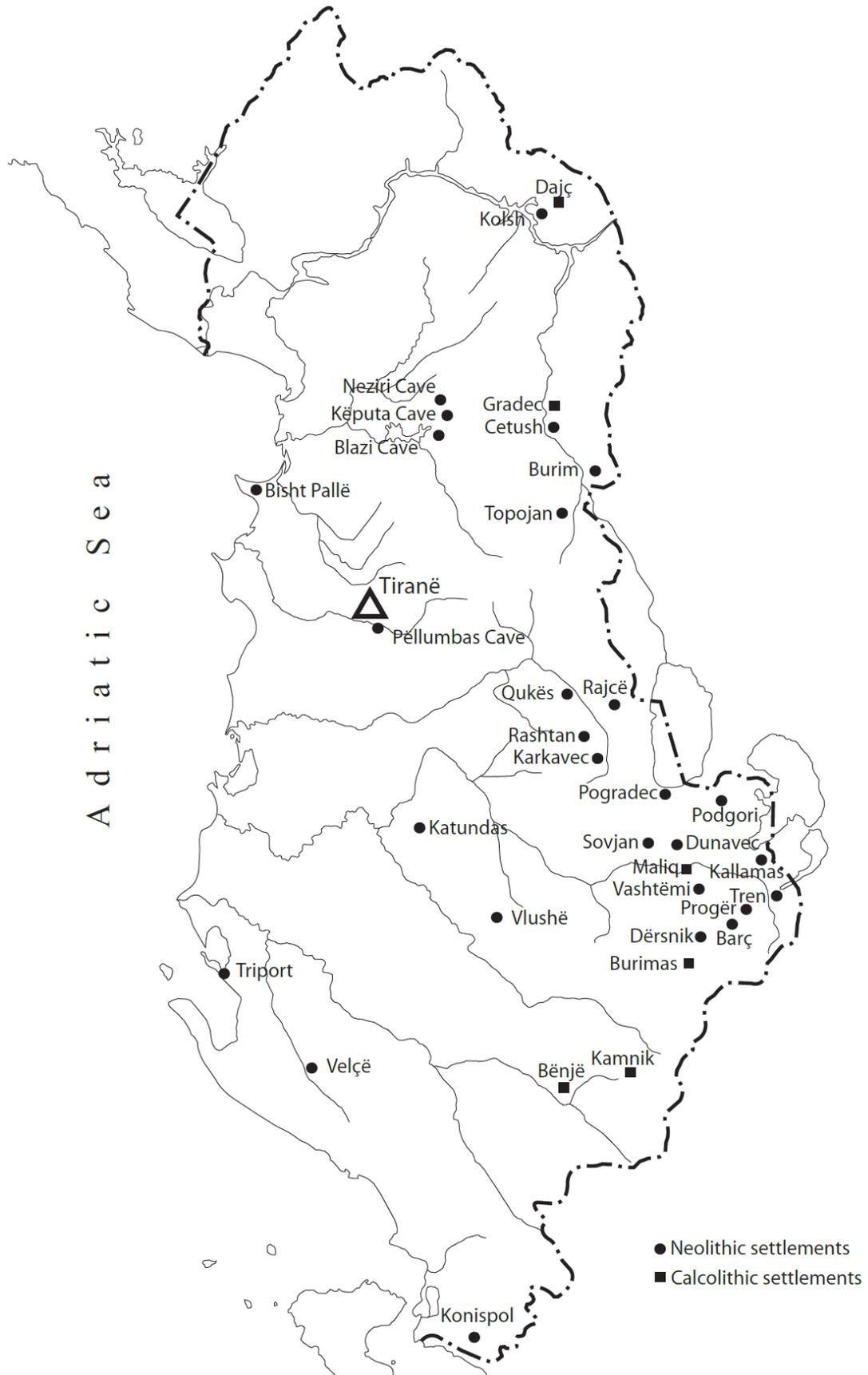
The systematic research of the Prehistoric period had started in Albania, after the Second World War. Prior to this period, information about the Prehistoric period was scarce, especially about the Neolithic and Calcolithic<sup>34</sup>.

The researches on the Stone Age began around 1960s in the southeastern of Albania. The first sites subject to excavations were Maliq, Tren, Cakran and Kamnik (Middle and Late Neolithic settlements). A decade later, in addition to the excavations in Dunavec and Vashtëmi (in the same region), new archaeological researches were undertaken covering other areas. In the northeastern Albania was excavated the Early Neolithic site of Kolsh (district of Kukës), in the eastern Albania was discovered the Early Neolithic site of Burim (region of Dibra), and in north-central Albania were excavated Blazi and Neziri Caves (Mat district).

The excavations of Neolithic and Calcolithic sites were expanded into well known areas during the 1980s, such as Burimas, Podgori, Barç and Dërsnik in the region of Korça, Gradec and Cetush in the region of Dibra, Bënjë in the district of Përmet, Luaras in Kolonja region, Rashtan in the district of Librazhd and Katundas in the district of Berat.

The potential of the archaeological evidences dated from Neolithic to Calcolithic made possible the outlining of representative cultures and the classification of Neolithic civilization in the territory of Albania into three main periods: Early Neolithic, Middle Neolithic, Late Neolithic and Calcolithic. (Fig. 1)

<sup>34</sup> Mustilli 1942, p. 678; Pittard 1921, p. 271-274.



The interdisciplinary researches were conducted only after the 90-ies in the field of Prehistory. A particular attention was given to the Konispol Cave<sup>35</sup> (in the most southern part of the country), a settlement that provided significant data on human activity for the Prehistoric period. Archaeological excavations were undertaken in the prehistoric site of Sovjan<sup>36</sup> in Korça region in several seasons during 1993-2004. The excavations and the archaeological materials are under study. The preliminary published reports give evidences of several occupations; the earliest one refers to a date that exceeds the Neolithic period<sup>37</sup>. The cultural deposits in Sovjan date back to the Middle Neolithic and stretch further from Early Bronze to Early Iron Age.

During 2008-2011 archaeological excavations were carried out in the Neolithic settlement of Kallamas, in the eastern bank of Lake “Prespa e Madhe” (by the same Albanian-French project team of Sovjan)<sup>38</sup>. The human occupation in the settlement covers the period of Middle and Late Neolithic.

Along the seashore at Bisht Palla (Durrës) were discovered cultural sequences of the Neolithic and Bronze Age. The results of the excavations are not yet published.

The archaeological excavations restarted in the settlement of Burim (Dibër) in 2007<sup>39</sup>. The intention was to get more data about the cultural relevance of Early Neolithic.

The archaeological projects have been recently carried out in the Early Neolithic settlement of Vashtëmi<sup>40</sup>. The study of stratigraphy, the archaeological assemblage and the application of radiocarbon dates (<sup>14</sup>C) indicate that the settlement was occupied since the earlier phase of Early Neolithic<sup>41</sup>.

A project of geomagnetic prospections was conducted in some prehistoric settlements in the southeastern of Albania during 2010-2011<sup>42</sup>. The results of the project are not yet published. Since 2009, the German-Albanian Paleolithic Programme<sup>43</sup> (GAP) investigates the Paleolithic and Mesolithic records in selected regions of Albania. The archaeological excavations are still progressing in Neziri, Blazi and Këputa Caves<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> Korkuti *et al.* 1996, p. 183-210.

<sup>36</sup> Lera & Touchais 2013, p. 27-28.

<sup>37</sup> Lera & Touchais 2002, p. 639.

<sup>38</sup> Lera & Touchais 2013, p. 35; Oberweiler *et al.* 2015, p. 56-61.

<sup>39</sup> Bunguri 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Southern Albania Neolithic Project is an interdisciplinary investigation research of the transition to agriculture in southern Albania between the Institute of Archaeology, Tirana (Albania) and University of Cincinnati in Ohio (USA).

<sup>41</sup> Korkuti 1982, p. 115.

<sup>42</sup> Bunguri *et al.* 2011, p. 1-19.

<sup>43</sup> GAP (*German-Albanian Project*) is a programme of research on Paleolithic and Mesolithic of Albania between the Institute of Archaeology of Tirana (Albania) and the Institute of Prehistoric Archaeology, University of Cologne, Köln (Germany).

<sup>44</sup> Richter *et al.* 2014, p 65-82; Hauck *et al.* 2016, p. 103-119; Hauck *et al.* 2017 p. 13-32.

## The archaeological research after the Second World War until 1990

Since the first discoveries of prehistoric settlements until the 90-ies, the studies have been focused mainly in the analysis and the interpretation of the archaeological assemblages comparing them with the regional cultural groups of the Balkans area.

The excavations conducted in the prehistoric site of Treni Cave<sup>45</sup>, in 1966, are considered as the first archaeological excavation on the Early Neolithic. The main intention was the investigation of cultural and chronological sequences of the Prehistoric period, especially after the discovery and the excavation of Maliq. The earliest cultural deposit belongs to the end of Early Neolithic, followed by Calcolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages.

During 1973 test excavations were conducted in Vlusha<sup>46</sup> (district of Scrapar). As a result of limited evidences and to obtain more archaeological data, other test excavations were undertaken in 1980 and 1990 to provide information about the deposit layer/s and its contents. The finds consist in lithics of typical Mesolithic technology in one of the trenches, while lithics and pot sherds were found in the other trenches. The different archaeological situation in the two areas (300 m distant from each other) defined the site as a settlement of Mesolithic cultural elements in Early Neolithic period<sup>47</sup>.

Vashtëmi was the first Neolithic settlement excavated in the Korça basin during the summer of 1974<sup>48</sup>. The white on red ware, the red monochrome, the impressed and the barbotin pottery represent cultural affiliation with neighboring cultural groups of Thessaly, Pelagonia, Ovče Pole of the Early Neolithic period<sup>49</sup>.

Two seasons of archaeological excavations were undertaken in 1975-1976 in the prehistoric settlement of Kolsh (in the northeastern of Albania)<sup>50</sup>. The stratigraphic data and the archaeological material consist in three successive occupations period: Kolshi I - Early Neolithic, Kolsh II - Middle Neolithic and Kolsh III - Late Neolithic.

The dark painted pottery, the cult tables and the anthropomorphic figurines indicates that the site had closed affiliations with the area of Starčevo culture in the Central Balkans<sup>51</sup>.

The rescue excavations in Burim were undertaken firstly in 1978<sup>52</sup>. The mono cultural layer provide data of Early Neolithic. The geographic position in the valley of Drini i Zi and

<sup>45</sup> Korkuti 1971, p. 33.

<sup>46</sup> Korkuti 1974, p. 230-231.

<sup>47</sup> Prendi 1979, 1981, 2008; Korkuti 2010, p. 45; Prendi & Bunguri 2014, p. 59-67.

<sup>48</sup> Korkuti 1982, p. 91-146.

<sup>49</sup> Korkuti 1982, p. 117; Prendi 2008.

<sup>50</sup> Korkuti 1978, p. 239-250.

<sup>51</sup> Korkuti 1978, p. 242-243; 1987, p. 11; 2010, p. 86.

<sup>52</sup> Prendi & Andrea 1981, p. 15-42.

cultural similarities with Kolsh I indicate that the two settlements find affinities and parallels with Starčevo group of the Central Balkans<sup>53</sup>.

The cave settlements of Blazi and Neziri in the karst region of Mat have been excavated during 1978-1981 and 1981-1982. The following cultural occupations correspond to “Pre-Neolithic” - Blaz I, Early Neolithic - Blaz II, Middle Neolithic - Blaz III and Calcolithic - Blaz IV<sup>54</sup>. The presence of lithics and the lack of pottery in Blaz I were interpreted as “Pre-Neolithic” horizon. The archaeological excavations under carried into these caves by the joint Albanian-German project provided that the “Pre-Neolithic” phase correspond to the Epigravettian period<sup>55</sup>.

The cultural assemblage, especially the presence of impressed pottery of Blaz II corresponds to the Adriatic group of Early Neolithic and Middle Neolithic. The pottery finds also analogies with the Early Neolithic settlements of northeastern and southeastern Albania<sup>56</sup>.

In addition to the researches in Blaz Cave, the archeological excavations were carried out on Neziri Cave in three seasons: 1980-81 and 1985. The stratigraphical sequences and the archaeological assemblage have established the chronology of the site in: Early Neolithic, Calcolithic, Early and Middle Bronze Age.

The systematic excavations during the 80-ies were extended more in the northeast of the country such as in Gradec and Cetush of Dibra region<sup>57</sup>. The cultural deposit in Gradec corresponds chronologically to the Calcolithic and was fully incorporated into the occupation sequence of Maliq II. A thin cultural layer that refers to the Early Neolithic was obtained in Cetush, followed by the deposits of Middle Neolithic and Middle Bronze Age<sup>58</sup>.

In the region of Dibra, on the surface of arable land of village Kronëzat have been found potsherds with typical shapes and decoration of Early Neolithic period. The barbotine, the impressed types, plastic decoration and incised techniques of the pottery<sup>59</sup> indicate the possible presence of an Early Neolithic site.

In the summer of 1982 one of the largest of archaeological excavations was undertaken in Podgori. A wide area of more than 300m<sup>2</sup> was excavated and the maximum depth of cultural deposits reached 3,20m.

Podgori has yielded the richest data of the Early Neolithic period in Albania. The settlement developed into three evolutionary sub-phases: Ia, Ib and Ic<sup>60</sup>. The two earliest phases,

<sup>53</sup> Prendi & Andrea 1981, p. 19.

<sup>54</sup> Prendi 2008, p. 676-680.

<sup>55</sup> Hauck *et al.* 2017, p. 16.

<sup>56</sup> Prendi 2008, p. 679; Korkuti 2010, p. 97.

<sup>57</sup> Korkuti 2010, p. 92-96.

<sup>58</sup> Korkuti 1987, p. 13; 1995, p. 78.

<sup>59</sup> Kaca 2012, p. 32.

<sup>60</sup> Prendi 2008, p. 827-841.

represent features of the classical development of the site, while the phase Ic represents a stage of decline toward the end of human activity in the settlement.

Some test excavations were carried out in the settlement of Barç in Korça region during 1981<sup>61</sup>. The very promising results made possible the organization of the archaeological project in the summer of 1983. The cultural deposits consist in two occupation level: the Early and Late Neolithic. The stratigraphical sequence and study of archaeological material, particularly that of ceramics, testify a single development phase of the settlement, during the end of Early Neolithic. Based on similarities with other settlements in the region, elements of Barç are present in Podgori, Vashtëmi, Rajca and Rashtan, around the area of southeastern Albania<sup>62</sup>.

The archaeological excavations were carried out in 1986, in the Katundas Cave<sup>63</sup>, district of Berat. The stratigraphical sequence and the pottery suggest the following periods: Early, Middle and Late Neolithic, Calcolithic, Bronze, and Iron Ages, Antiquity and Late Antiquity.

Another settlement of Early Neolithic was discovered in 1984 in the village of Rashtan<sup>64</sup>, near the town of Prrenjas. According to the typology studies on the ceramic material the settlement date back at the last phase of the Early Neolithic. The analogies on the ceramics might suggest interaction with the settlement of Rajca, Burimi and Kolsh I, as well as cultural affiliations with other Early Neolithic settlements of Korça basin.

The archaeological excavations in the Early Neolithic site of Rajca gave evidences of the successive deposits: Rajca I and Rajca II<sup>65</sup>.

Rajca I correspond to the end of the Early Neolithic, while Rajca II follow the first phase without interruption. Rajca I is represented by similar cultural developments as Barçi I, Kolshi I, Burimi, Blazi II, Katundasi I. The ceramic assemblage of Rajca II introduces evidences of the early Middle Neolithic<sup>66</sup>.

In order to enhance the knowledge on the Prehistory period, the archaeological excavations were focused in 1989-1990 in the Konispol Cave, in the southern part of Albania. These excavations provided cultural deposits of Early, Middle, Late Neolithic, Calcolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Antiquity and Middle Ages.

The Early Neolithic period was represented until the 90's by the following settlements: Vlusha, Vashtëmia, Podgori I, Barçi I, Kolshi I, Burimi I, Cetushi I, Rajca I, Rashtan, Blazi II, Neziri I, Katundas I, Tren, Konispol III.

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<sup>61</sup> Lera 1983, p. 243-244.

<sup>62</sup> Lera 1993, p. 18.

<sup>63</sup> Korkuti 1986, p. 251-252.

<sup>64</sup> Gjipali 1995, p. 35-37.

<sup>65</sup> Gjipali 1989, p. 259-260; 1997, p. 25-56; 2000, p. 29.

<sup>66</sup> Gjipali 2000, p. 48.

## The archaeological research after 1990

The period after 1990 until now has changed the approach of prehistoric studies. The access and the application of new methodologies and technologies, the integration of archaeology data simultaneously with the results of studies of other disciplines such as archeo-botany, archeo-zoology, paleontology, geo-archeology, might be considered as a second phase in the Albanian history of archeology.

The first interdisciplinary research project (Albanian-American) was undertaken in southern part of the country, in the Konispol Cave<sup>67</sup>. The excavations started in 1992 and continued into 2 seasons (1992-1993). The potential that had been provided by test excavations few years ago enabled further investigation of human occupation, the collection of micro-macro faunal and plant remains in order to reconstruct the main economic activities of the cave inhabitants during prehistoric periods, as well as to obtain samples for the radiocarbon dating<sup>68</sup>. Researches established the following sequence occupations in the cave: Paleolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Calcolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Archaic and Hellenistic periods.

The plants remains testify the presence of Early Neolithic agriculture assemblage. The domesticated animal species were found in a large quantity and were very important for the inhabitants of the cave. The total absence of domesticated plants and animals in the Mesolithic context indicate the full development of the Early Neolithic package. Based on the archaeological evidence, especially on the impressed pottery and radiocarbon dating, the Konispol III is culturally and chronologically established into the Early Neolithic Adriatic group.

After 2000, the archaeological researches re-started in some already excavated settlements, as in Korça region and Burim<sup>69</sup>. The excavations of 2007 in Burim indicated the same cultural situation that was established by the past excavations of 1978.

The Southern Albanian Neolithic Project (SANAP) is an interdisciplinary project with the primary attention to investigate the transition to the agriculture in southern Albania. The research focused on the southeastern districts of Korça, Pogradec and Librazhd, these sites were selected because the density of Early Neolithic settlements in the Korça basin. The extracted cores from five Early Neolithic sites (Rajcë, Xhumba, Progër, Podgorie, Vashtëmi) provided new dates from three sites<sup>70</sup>. Vashtëmi yielded the earliest date among the other sites. The excavations were carried out in 2010, 2011, and 2013. The radiocarbon dates from the excavations places its earliest occupation in the mid-seventh millennium BC, contemporary with Early Neolithic sites in Greece making it one of the earliest farming sites in Europe. Intensive sampling for micro- and macro-

<sup>67</sup> Korkuti *et al.* 1996, p. 183-208.

<sup>68</sup> Korkuti 1996, p. 184.

<sup>69</sup> Bunguri 2010, p. 32.

<sup>70</sup> Allen & Gjipali 2013, p. 37-54; Allen & Gjipali 2014, p. 107-120; Gjipali 2017, 109.

botanical and faunal remains reveals a diverse economy that included cereal-based agriculture, animal husbandry and both hunting. Pogradec and Podgorie were occupied after 6,000 cal BC.

The current archaeological research in the framework of the Albanian-German project focuses on three key areas: the lagoon of Butrint in the south, the large bay of Vlora in the southwestern coast and the karst region of Mat in the north. Surveys and test excavations in all the three regions lead to the discovery of Middle and Upper Paleolithic material which indicate that Albania holds a huge potential for Paleolithic research. The excavations in Blazi Cave provided undisturbed Paleolithic sequence so far. The later comprises an exceptionally rich and well-preserved Epigravettian deposit dated around 10'000 years before present<sup>71</sup>.

The same holds true for Paleolithic record of nearby Këputa Cave. The investigated section in the entrance area of this cave show features of repeated erosion. In addition, massive rock-fall made this place less attractive for human occupation.

In Neziri Cave was discovered only a Mesolithic occupations<sup>72</sup>. The long succession remains belong to the Neolithic period and the subsequent metal ages.

Several archaeological excavations were carried out during the last five years in Karkavec<sup>73</sup> (Librazhd), Triport (Vlora) and Qukës (Librazhd)<sup>74</sup>. The excavations demonstrated that the cultural sequence of prehistoric periods was damaged over time by human activity and natural erosion. In addition, a test excavation was undertaken in 2016 in Pogradec in order to provide more data of the previously recorded cultural sequence. The cultural deposit and the study of ceramics suggest that the settlement can be dated to the last phase of Early Neolithic<sup>75</sup>.

## Conclusion

The systematic investigations of the Prehistoric period, particularly on the Early Neolithic before the 1990s, were based mostly on typological and comparative studies of the archaeological assemblage. The studies focusing on the stratigraphical sequences and the strong ceramic analogies with other cultural groups in the neighboring regions, have enabled various cultural evaluations into the chronological sequence of Early Neolithic. These studies have permitted the establishment of geographical and cultural units which development was influenced by the Aegean in the southeast, the Central Balkans in the northeast and to the Adriatic in the west<sup>76</sup>. During this period, the territory of Albania has been a meeting point of cultural elements of the Anatolian-Balkan complex and Adriatic-Mediterranean area.

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<sup>71</sup> Hauck *et al.* 2017, p. 16.

<sup>72</sup> Hauck *et al.* 2017, p. 16-23.

<sup>73</sup> Andoni & Hasa 2014, p. 10-11.

<sup>74</sup> Andoni *et al.* 2016, p. 121-130.

<sup>75</sup> Andoni *et al.* 2017, p. 123-140.

<sup>76</sup> F. Prendi 2008; Korkuti 1995, 2010.

Beside limited possibilities, the five decades of research conducted before 90-ies provided important data for the territory during prehistoric period. These studies established the basis of chronology and important aspects of cultural developments for the Early Neolithic and other periods. The main contribute of the Albanian scholars consist in the interpretation of the abundant archaeological evidences as the only way to highlight the socio-economic and cultural issues of Neolithic. The methodology of excavation and the inability to interact with other disciplines such as archeo-botany, archeo-zoology, palynology, geo-archaeology and the radiocarbon dating did not allow a thorough study of this period. The recent excavations of some Early Neolithic settlements have contributed to the introduction of some aspects of social organizations and economy productions and to define the dates of their establishment and consequently to construct a chronological sequence based on the absolute chronology. The results of analyses of the environment, flora, fauna, and radiocarbon dating provide new data on the process of Neolithisation from what has been previously presented. In order to make a full interpretation of the Neolithisation process in the territory of Albania new excavations must be undertaken, especially in the sites excavated before the 90-ies that have not yet been part of the re-assessment programme of the Early Neolithic period.

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