

ANNUAL REPORT: Malvieu 2019 FIELD SCHOOL

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Malvieu, season 2019, the area where Late Bronze Age houses were found. On this picture, 3 IFR students are collaborating with 3 UMB students, supervised by T. Poigt and H. Bertram for exploring this new area, located in the upper part of the hill.

The 2019 Malvieu season international team worked together to explore new areas of the site, bringing a deeper insight into the dynamic processes developing in the Mediterranean area towards 1000 BCE. The students were given the opportunity to discover the heritage of the area where the excavation took place, the Montagne Noire, otherwise well known for the role it played in the medieval Albigensian Crusade.

The period spreading between the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age (c. 1200/c.800 BCE) is, in the Mediterranean area, often depicted as a time of disruption: the social structures born in the Bronze Age would have proven inadequate in managing the challenges of this very dynamic time, resulting in some regions (the Aegean world, for instance) in a total collapse. What is nowadays Mediterranean France was not, in this perspective, an exception: the crisis would have occurred here at the very end of the local Bronze Age, towards 800 BCE, and would have been characterized by the abandonment of hill-top settlement for lowland locations.

Malvieu is a hill-top settlement, located in the Montagne Noire, on the northern edge of the Mediterranean littoral area. It has a surface of c. 2 ha. 10% of this surface has been explored, and 2019 campaign aimed among other objectives at opening new areas increasing this feature. The settlement is built on steep slopes (from 25 to 40%), in what is nowadays –as most of the Mediterranean mountain area- a woodland. The site is settled from the end of the Bronze Age to the late 6th century BCE, and is therefore a unique field to explore this fundamental period. A

stone fortification was built c. 800 BCE. Since 2019, clear evidence for dense inner occupation was known only for the period posterior to the construction of the rampart: it appeared increasingly complex, with the construction during the 7th century BCE of a huge 250+ m² compound, probably an elite house much bigger than other domestic buildings, which surface is normally comprised between 30 and 80 m². Houses were made of stone, mud and wood, and were aggregated in neighborhoods structured by open spaces allowing for circulation and outdoor activities, among which metalworking. The significance of Malvieu excavation can be measured through the fact that, until our excavation, Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age domestic architecture was thought to be limited to c. 10m² cabins, settled for a short period of time, and that no stone ramparts was believed to have been built before 600 BCE.

Our team clearly demonstrated this season that Malvieu was probably settled earlier than previously acknowledged (c.1150 BCE, rather than 950 BCE as previously thought): a newly explored area has provided direct evidence for occupation from this period. The remains of walls, probably built with mudbricks (the first occurrence of this material in metal ages hilltop settlements: it will become very frequent from the 6th century BCE on) have been uncovered. These walls seem to have belonged to two or three houses, which architecture is similar to the later ones: their long wall following the orientation of the slope, with the upper part conserving traces of terraces built with small stone blocks.

The rampart built towards 800 BCE proved this year to be a much more complex structure than we previously suspected: hard work made on the edge of a modern path has allowed for the recovery of architectural remains, demonstrating the existence of a huge massive rectangular bastion, of around 8 X 6m, built with huge stone blocks and mud, probably mud bricks. This thick bastion, probably mostly red seen from outside, introduced a disruption in an otherwise rather slim rampart (2m), whose dominant color was obviously the limestone white. On both side of the bastion, an opening allowed for entering the site. The main one was on the eastern part, but its width could not be ascertained this year (it was badly damaged during the making of the path).

The 2019 season results reinforced the idea according which Malvieu is the material expression of a form of community that emerged during the Late Bronze Age, probably as soon as the 12th century BCE (the very same century of the abandonment of the Mycenaean palaces). Malvieu became an arena for social competition, culminating with radical differentiation processes mostly active during the 7th-6th century BCE. But this community, widely engaged in exchange networks (in 2014, we found a bronze object coming from the Caucasus), could also implement important cooperative works, the rampart to begin with. The nature of the site, its temporality, brings southern France much closer to the Eastern Mediterranean than previously suspected: same kind of community, evolving until the 8th century according the same patterns, and following after this date different paths. Establishing this fact was not an easy task: we had to accept to exploit to the maximum a fragmentary evidence, which recovery was otherwise made more difficult by the site topography and environment. We had to make the best use of 3D technologies, drone survey, beside more traditional technics, all aspects that were taught to the students during afternoon lectures made in Saint-Pons. The team involved in this research has had to face many challenges. But from the field to the lab, from the observation of architectural remains to the analyze of Late Bronze Age pottery remains, it proved more than up to the task.