



Fig. 1: Human hair from Es Càrritx cave © P. Witte/ASOME_UAB

Fig 2: Es Càrritx cave © Consell Insular de Menorca, P. Arnau, J. L. Florit, J. Márquez & M. Márquez/ ASOME_UAB

WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY SEMINARS

TOWARDS AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF ALKALOIDS

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF DRUG USE IN EUROPEAN PREHISTORY

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For a long time, archaeological research on human use of drug plants in the distant past has been based on indirect evidence. Traditionally this phenomenon has been explored using varied sources, such as pollen and macrobotanical remains, material culture (pottery vessels, lime containers, smoking pipes, snuffing kits, and enema syringes, among others), historical references, cross-cultural studies, drug-inspired iconography, and artistic depictions of psychoactive plants and drug paraphernalia. However, the last few years have witnessed extraordinary advances in the field of Biomolecular Archaeology, which applies chemical techniques to characterise and identify organic compounds in archaeological samples. Biochemical residue analyses have the potential to reveal psychoactive compounds, alkaloids, and their major metabolites on drug-related paraphernalia and human biological samples from the past. This lecture will focus on the identification of drug alkaloids in human hair strands from the cave of Es Càrritx, a Bronze Age site in the Balearics which has provided the earliest direct evidence of multiple drug use in Europe and, more interestingly, the consumption of at least two different vegetal sources in the course of shamanic rites 3,000 years ago.

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