Environmental and Human Impact in the Prehistoric Colonization of the Alps.

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This paper addresses current topics of prehistoric settlement and landscape archaeology in the Alps, in particular in the central Alps. It will focus on three very specific periods of transition and colonization: the Copper Age, time of the Iceman Oetzi; the Bronze Age, in particular the settlement expansion in the middle and late Bronze Age; and the Iron Age with its complex economic contact situation.

Landscape archaeology analyses problems of environmental and human interaction with varying approaches: one addresses the local level, it concerns single settlement sites, their structure and chronology. In-site analyses of archaeobiological remains add valuable information on subsistence and resource strategies of early alpine populations. The second approach is regional or even supra-regional, it questions patterns of land use and settlement, along with palaeoenvironmental off-site investigations, e.g. on climate, vegetation, and geomorphology.

There is, for the Copper Age, a strong coincidence of archaeological findings and environmental proxy data indicating a first important period of colonization throughout the Alps. In the Bronze Age, things become more complicated, and ecodynamic processes include both climatic impacts and specific human responses with long-lasting effects on the natural environment. Climatic events apparently still influence human settlement activities in the later Iron Age periods, while new social and economic situations also trigger new strategies of human presence in the Alps. The paper will conclude with an outlook on most recent research activities in the southern central Alps.