The medieval iron market in Ariège (France). Multidisciplinary analytical approach and multivariate analyses

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A R T I C L E   I N   P R E S S

The medieval iron market in Ariège (French Pyrenees) is characterised by its complexity leading to many questions regarding the ore used in relation to the artefacts encountered in archaeological settings. Despite the conclusive study of the treaty that regulated iron vs. coal exchanges from the 14th to the 19th c. by Verna et al., many questions remain unanswered concerning provenance and circulation of ores and products. Based on a combination of trace elemental analysis and multivariate statistical methods (discriminant analysis, hierarchical clustering analysis), we propose to follow an elemental-based signature from ore to artefacts, suited to the direct iron process, to clarify provenance hypotheses. We define the chemical signature of the Ariège area and compare it to that of slag inclusions in artefacts uncovered in several main archaeological sites from the Ariège area but also outside of this region. The results from this study are consistent with prior knowledge from historical sources. In the Ariège region, results highlight the multiple origins of products encountered at Montréal-de-Sos, a site close to known trade routes, whereas the isolated Castel-Minier site primarily contained objects from local ores and most objects retrieved from the Mirabat castle (Couserans) are coming from outside Ariège, possibly an indirect consequence from the exchange treaty. The presence of pins made of Ariègean ores is also demonstrated in the far more distant Capestang collegiate (near Narbonne, outside Ariège). This opens the way to finer studies in the politico-economical control of the iron supply for the building of medieval monuments in Southern France.

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A B S T R A C T

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1. Introduction

In the Middle Ages the exploitation of manganese-rich ores is attested in several European bloomery iron-production areas (for example: the Pyrenees, Catalonia, Lombardy, the French Alps, Champagne, Burgundy, Southern Germany and Carinthia) (Sclafert, 1926; Verna and Benoit, 1991; Belhoste, 2001; Verna, 2001). The specific properties of these ores are thought to have been recognised by metalworkers since they could lead more easily to carbonised alloys during the bloomery smelting stage (Truffaut, 1994). For the French Pyrenees, a historical study by Verna (2001), based on documentary sources, shed light on the iron-making activities from the 13th to the 16th centuries in the Ariège area. This area witnessed the uncommon persistence of the bloomery process during the late Middle Age until the 19th century. This is particularly due to the development of the mouline, a particular type of bloomery process forges using the hydraulic force for bellows and hammers since the late 13th century (Verna, 2001, 2008). In this area, the geological (Tollon, 1964; Dubois, 1996, 2000) and historical studies (Verna, 2000, 2001) suggest the widespread exploitation of the Mont Rancié iron mines in the Vicdessos valley, which during the Middle Ages were the main suppliers of ore for the County of Foix (Fig. 1).

A dynamic iron-making activity centred on the Vicdessos valley developed. The production of the mollines supplied local and regional iron markets via the major trade road that connected the County of Foix to Toulouse. This city was therefore a focal point of the iron market (Verna, 2001). Historical sources mention that Ariègean iron made of Mont Rancié ores was distributed from Toulouse to Narbonne (more than a hundred kilometres NE from the Ariège area) and the Provence area (in Southeastern France) where iron from different sources were attested (Verna, 2001).

Verna (2001) mentions in particular the use of Ariegean iron in the Lion tower at Arles (in Provence). Textual evidence shows that the County of Foix was also supplied by iron produced in neighbouring areas (Verna, 2001). Lastly, in the specific case of the Ariège area, ore from the Vicdessos valley was exported to the Couserans (Fig. 1) following an ore-charcoal exchange treaty concluded in 1347–1348 that remained in force until the 19th century (Chevalier, 1956; Verna, 2001). Under this treaty, the Vicdessos supplied ore to some hydraulic forges in the eastern part of the Couserans (Erce and Massat valleys) and received in exchange the wood and charcoal needed by the forges of the Vicdessos valley (Verna, 2001). Given that some or many exchanges are not documented by the textual sources, the precise distribution conditions of ore and iron products in the Ariège area, and the socioeconomic relationships they represent, remain difficult to elucidate.

This study proposes to consider the archaeological findings and particularly the iron-based artefacts, to complement textual evidences on the complex Ariegean iron market. Several castles were built and occupied during the late medieval period and their excavation has provided various iron artefacts (nails, knives, etc.). Determining the origin of these artefacts and verifying whether they were made from local or distant ore would provide crucial complementary data to historical sources. Further away from the Ariège area, probing the possible presence of Ariegean iron is also a challenging goal.

Many researchers have tried to analyse iron objects, bloom, slag material and potential ores in order to establish the origin of iron artefacts made by the bloomery process. They have used several approaches such as the examination of isotopic ratios (Gale et al., 1990; Schwab et al., 2006; Degryse et al., 2007); the analysis of trace elements in the metal of the iron artefacts (Devos et al., 2000); the analysis of the major elements in slag inclusions (hereafter, SI) (Hedges and Salter, 1979; Buchwald and Wivel, 1998; Blakelock et al., 2009); and more recently, the analysis of the trace elements in SI (Coustures et al., 2003, 2006; Schwab et al., 2006; Desaulty, 2008; Desaulty et al., 2009). Recently published work by Desaulty et al. (2009) demonstrated the effectiveness of combined analyses of major and trace elements on ores, slag samples and SI to follow the elemental signatures from a given iron ore to the SI in the artefacts in order to test provenance hypotheses when the metallurgical characteristics of the objects have previously been thoroughly examined. It is important to stress here that trace elemental study must be performed only on those SI selected using a major elements filtering process, as proposed by Dillmann and L’Héritier (2007) to select inclusions coming from the smelting stage and not from the smithing stage (see experimental part § 2.2.2). The trace elemental analytical methodology developed by Desaulty et al. (2009) consists of the following three steps: (1) “elements that pass completely in the slag (lithophilic elements) without being contaminated by lining or charcoal during the smelting are selected”, (2) “elements with similar valences and ionic radii, but that are not quasi-isotopes, are selected to form couples in order to define the elemental signature”, (3) “the trace element ratios measured in samples were compared one by one to test the compatibilities between the elemental signature of a given area and any artefact of unidentified origin”. This approach has proven to be effective in excluding a potential source but should be handled with care when validating a provenance hypothesis. Not considering simultaneously the full range of elemental pairs may indeed lead to a loss of crucial elemental information and the overlooking of some significant chemical patterning in particular considering that some ratios of concentrations can be similar between geographically distinct iron-making areas. However, enlarging the list

![Location of the Ariège area and Capestang](image-url)

**Fig. 1.** Location of the Ariège area and Capestang. The main iron mines and the archaeological sites of Castel-Minier, Lercoul, Riverenert, Savignac are represented within the Ariège area. For better localisation, the current borders of France and Ariège are given.
of characteristic elements from a given area leads to difficulties as it requires the joint testing of a large number of elemental ratios. For example, if 15 elements are considered, 105 ratios need to be studied and compared two by two. We therefore developed a synthetic multivariate methodology to consider simultaneously all the concentration data to test a potential origin.

The multivariate methodology developed is applied here to study the organisation of the Ariegean iron market. To this end, iron artefacts of unidentifiable origin, from archaeological sites within the production region but also from outside this area were selected and studied to examine their origin by comparison to ores, slags, forged bars and objects of known source.

2. Sample sets and methods

2.1. Sample sets

This study considered three sample sets. The first one, the reference corpus, consists of samples (ores, slags and metal samples) produced with Ariegean ores that were used to characterise the Ariegean elemental signature. The second, a calibration one, consists of characteristic elements from a given area leads to difficulties as it requires the joint testing of a large number of elemental ratios. For example, if 15 elements are considered, 105 ratios need to be studied and compared two by two. We therefore developed a synthetic multivariate methodology to consider simultaneously all the concentration data to test a potential origin.

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2.1.1. Reference set: ores, slags and metal pieces of Ariegean origin

We collected a reference set (Table 1) made of:

- Ore samples from three sectors:
  - From different levels in the NW side of the Mont Rancié near nine entrances of the Sem mines.
  - From the Lercoul archaeological site on the Southern side of the Mont Rancié including a medieval exploitation nearby (Fig. 1).
  - From the archaeological excavations on the Castel-Minier bloomery site. The Vicdessos was supplying with ore the forges in the Eastern part of the Couserans where Castel-Minier is located (Verna, 2001). Leroy (2010) showed that the ore reduced on the bloomery site came from the Mont Rancié mines.

- Slag samples originating from four iron-production sites (Fig. 1):
  - Lercoul that used the ore mined nearby.
  - Riverenert, the adjacent mine being the only medieval iron mine known in the Couserans (Verna, 2001).
  - Savignac-les-Ormeaux.
  - Castel-Minier. The slag samples we selected were recovered from slag heap 1 (Forsch et al., 2011) and clearly linked to the smelting activities of the site.

- Metal samples (gromps, semi-finished products) uncovered on the Castel-Minier site from the area linked to smelting activities using Ariegean ore.

2.1.2. Calibrating set: metal samples of known origin

At first, we used those Ariegean metal samples coming from Castel-Minier (Table 1) that were also used to define the Ariegean elemental signatures. Secondly, we considered non Ariegean metal pieces, coming from various iron-production areas that reduced various kinds of ores: some with major elemental composition very close to the Ariegean ones as manganese-rich ores from Lombardy (Northern Italy) and from the Provence area (Southeastern France), as well as clearly distinct ones such as phosphorus-rich ore from the Lorraine area (Northeastern France) (Table 2).

2.1.3. Set of unidentifiable origin: iron artefacts of unidentifiable origin

We selected (Table 3):

- Well-dated ferrous artefacts of diverse typologies (nails, weapons, projectiles, blades, etc.) from four main archaeological sites within the Ariège area (Fig. 1):
  - The Montiré-de-Sos castle (Guillot, 2008).
  - The Castel-Minier site (Téreygeol, 2009). We chose finished objects related to the castle and its silver mine that are clearly

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Number of samples</th>
<th>Remark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ore samples</td>
<td>Geological</td>
<td>Sem mines, Northwestern side of the Mont Rancié</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Prospections carried out by S. Leroy et al.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geological</td>
<td>Mine near Lercoul, Southern side of the Mont Rancié</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ores known to originate from Sem mines (Verna, 2001). Excavations carried out by F. Téreygeol over several summers since 2005 (Téreygeol, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Archaeological</td>
<td>Castel-Minier</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ores known to originate from the Lercoul mine. Sampled from a slag heap containing 60 tonnes of slag and dated from the 3rd century AD (Dubois, 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entrapped, tapped</td>
<td>Lercoul</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Ores known to originate from the Lercoul mine. Sampled from a slag heap containing 60 tonnes of slag and dated from the 3rd century AD (Dubois, 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tapped</td>
<td>Riverenert</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ores known to originate from the local Riverenert mine and smelted from the 1st century AD to the 16th-17th centuries (Jarrier, 1993; Dubois, 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tapped</td>
<td>Savignac-les-Ormeaux</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ores known to originate from the Mont Rancié. Used bloomery process in the early modern period (Grimbert, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entrapped, tapped</td>
<td>Castel-Minier</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Ores known to originate from Sem mines (Verna, 2001). The iron production was shown to be effective from the end of the 12th century to the first half of the 16th century as terminus post quem (Téreygeol, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental slag samples</td>
<td>Tapped</td>
<td>Experimental smelting (XP07)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ore from a Sem mine. Performed in 2007 on the Melle platform (France) directed by F. Téreygeol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal pieces</td>
<td>Rod, ingot, gromps, curved sheet iron, plate, piece of a bloom</td>
<td>Castel-Minier</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ores known to originate from Sem mines (Verna, 2001; Leroy, 2010)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
not archaeologically connected to the neighbouring iron smelting site.
- The Mirabat castle (Lasnier, 2007).
- The Sainte-Catherine castle (Rouch, 2006).

Artefacts further away from the Ariegean production area.
We incorporated samples of iron reinforcing bars used in the St-Etienne collegiate church of Capestang, a hundred kilometres away, near Narbonne (courtesy of P. Bernardi and M. Bourin).

2.2. Determination of the elemental compositions

Our analytical methodology builds on the recent work by Desaulty et al. (2009). We followed two protocols respectively for ore and slag analysis, and for the SI analysis.

2.2.1. Protocol for ore and slag analysis

Ore and slag samples were analysed using bulk methods of analysis that provide an average elemental composition of the sample. The samples were first crushed into powder in an agate shatter box before being sieved at 125 μm. Pellets were then prepared by agglomerating and compressing the fine powders.

The major element composition was determined using an Energy Dispersive Spectrometry system (IDEFIX setup, SAMx company) coupled with a Cambridge Stereoscan 120 Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM-EDS, using a 15 kV accelerating voltage).

In iron containing slags, the relative accuracy errors were estimated to be 2% for measurements of major elements, and 10% for minor elements with concentrations lower than 1 wt%, down to 0.5 wt% (detection limit) (Dillmann and L'Héritier, 2007; Pagès et al., 2011). The detection system allows the quantification of relatively light elements down to oxygen with good precision. A reliable quantification is therefore performed on samples that do not contain carbon or hydrogen when all the major elements constituting the sample are detected. Conversely, the analysis of some iron carbonates present in ores is precluded. We expressed the results as oxides concentration. In order to obtain a representative measurement of the average composition, the entire surface of the pellets (several mm²) was analysed and an average content was calculated for bulk composition.

The bulk trace elemental composition was determined following a procedure adapted from Desaulty et al. (2008). Two techniques were used: Instrumental Neutron Activation Analysis (INAA) and Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometry (ICP-MS). Aliquots of 120 mg of the samples for INAA and 50 mg for ICP-MS analyses were prepared. For ICP-MS analysis, samples were prepared by acid dissolution of silicate matrix in open vessels using a new acid digestion procedure. In the context of this work, we developed and implemented a simpler, less expensive and safer procedure by substituting the conventional HF/HClO₄ mixture by NH₄F (Mariet et al., 2008). ICP-MS measurements were carried out using the Thermo Electron X7 quadrupole spectrometer at the

Table 2
Calibrating set: metal samples of known origin analysed for the development of the methodology based on the multivariate approach.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Number of metal pieces</th>
<th>Remark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ariegean metal</td>
<td>Rod, ingot, grumps,</td>
<td>Castel-Minier in Ariège area,</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ores known to originate from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pieces</td>
<td>curved sheet iron,</td>
<td>Southern France</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sem mines (Verna, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>plate, piece of a bloom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Ariegean</td>
<td>Tool blank</td>
<td>Bugnate in Lombardy, Northern Italy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Provided by M. Tizzoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metal pieces</td>
<td></td>
<td>Schilpario in Lombardy, Northern Italy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Provided by M. Tizzoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bloom n°1</td>
<td>Minet in Provence area, Southern France</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Provided by M. Tizzoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bloom n°2</td>
<td>Experimental smelting using ore from the</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Provided by M. Leroy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lorraine area, Northeastern France</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remark
- The Mirabat castle (Lasnier, 2007).
- The Sainte-Catherine castle (Rouch, 2006).

Artefacts of unidentified origin collected at the Montréal-de-Sos, Castel-Minier, Mirabat and Ste-Catherine castles, and at the Collegiate church of Capestang.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Sample name</th>
<th>Archaeological site</th>
<th>Dating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knife</td>
<td>Mds8844</td>
<td>Montréal-de-Sos</td>
<td>13th−15th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knife</td>
<td>Mds 8858</td>
<td>(from areas of the dungeon)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knife</td>
<td>Mds 8889</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knife</td>
<td>Mds 9227</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame nail</td>
<td>Mds 29336</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron plate</td>
<td>Mds 29342</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equine iron</td>
<td>Mds 29409</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame nail</td>
<td>Mds 29421</td>
<td></td>
<td>13th−15th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nail</td>
<td>Mds 29431</td>
<td></td>
<td>13th−15th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projectile</td>
<td>Mds 29522</td>
<td></td>
<td>14th−15th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Mds 29566</td>
<td></td>
<td>13th−14th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Mds 29591</td>
<td></td>
<td>13th−15th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>CM05-2-31</td>
<td>Castel-Minier (from the castle area)</td>
<td>13th−15th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>CM05-2-34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>CM05-2-36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little rod</td>
<td>CM05-2-54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ring</td>
<td>CM05-2-59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nail?</td>
<td>CM06-2002-1</td>
<td></td>
<td>15th−16th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>CM07-2044</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chisel</td>
<td>i10013</td>
<td>Castel-Minier (from the silver mine)</td>
<td>Late 13th−15th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nails</td>
<td>MIR 1 to MIR 3 ; MIR 5 to MIR 12</td>
<td>Mirabat (from the cistern)</td>
<td>Late 13th−14th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Ste Cath n°2, Ste Cath n°4, Ste Cath n°5</td>
<td>Sainte-Catherine (from the caput castri)</td>
<td>Late 13th−early 14th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pins</td>
<td>CAP 1, CAP 3</td>
<td>St-Etienne collegiate church of Capestang (from a pinnacle)</td>
<td>15th−16th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Service Interdisciplinaire sur les Systèmes Moléculaires et les Matériaux (SIS2M, Saclay CEA Centre, France) equipped with a concentric nebuliser (Thermo Fisher Scientific). The relative uncertainty on results was estimated at 7% (Desaulty et al., 2008).

Concentrations were determined by comparison to international geochemical standards (GSN, BEN, ACE, Centre de Recherches Pétrographiques et Géochimiques, France; GXR4, United States Geology Survey, USA), and trace element-doped silica standards prepared at SIS2M. For the INAA analyses, all sample irradiations were carried out at the nuclear reactor Osiris (Saclay CEA Centre, France). The relative uncertainties on results were estimated to be below 5%, except for Zr (Joron et al., 1997).

2.2.2. Protocol for SI analysis

Metal samples were cross-sectioned to expose both the metallic matrix and the slag inclusions entrapped in the matrix. Cross sections were embedded in epoxy resin, cut in smaller transverse sections and polished using SiC abrasive paper (grades 80–4000). Samples were subsequently examined with an OLYMPUS light microscope (BX51 model) under reflected light to select regions of interest, to qualify the nature and the distribution of the SI and to visualise possible welding lines.

The major element composition of SI was determined using SEM-EDS with operating parameters identical to those adopted for ore and slag analysis. Data processing was performed following...
Dillmann and L'Héritier (2007: pp. 1812–1817) on SI in medieval iron construction. (1) Between 30 and 50 SI per artefact were analysed. (2) SI composition of compounds that are not reduced (noted NRC for Non Reduced Compounds: mainly Al₂O₃, SiO₂, K₂O, CaO, and MgO) are plotted two by two and fitted by a linear model passing through zero. If the determination coefficient \( R^2 \) is over 0.7 the ratio is considered as constant and is assumed to be the slope of the modelled line. In this case, SI were demonstrated to be representative of the smelting stage. (3) If \( R^2 \) is below 0.7 but a linear behaviour can be shown for a majority of the inclusions, the “outlying data” are deleted from the NRC data bivariate plots in iterative steps. This procedure is necessary because erratic SI are primarily caused by local concentration effects or by SI corresponding to additives during forging. These SI are eliminated here since they cannot be used to define the elemental signature of the artefact. Note that the analysis of SI is a very effective means of detecting recycling. In case of recycling, Dillmann and L'Héritier (2009) showed that different constant ratios are identified. Finally, in some cases, constant NRC ratios cannot be identified in the SI composition of an artefact and thus its origin cannot be studied. (4) By eliminating all these possible pitfalls, an average weighted major element content is expressed per artefact, taking into account the surface of each analysed SI. It is combined to a pseudo bulk average content and thus compared to macroscopic slag composition. This average weighted content will be noted with a * symbol following the oxide name (e.g. MnO*).

For the trace element analyses, between 10 and 15 SI per artefact were selected, when possible, among the SI representative of the smelting stage. Their trace element composition was determined using the Laser Ablation Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometer (LA-ICP-MS) at the Ernest Babelon Centre (UMR-5060 IRAMAT CNRS, Orléans, France). After probing a large range of possible operating parameters, the laser repetition rate was set to 6 Hz, the ablation time to 50 s and the ablation crater to 80 μm in diameter. We used the quantification procedure developed by Gratuze (1999) and Gratuze et al. (2001) using both internal standardization and external calibration. Silicon values determined by SEM-EDS were used to calculate trace element concentrations instead of normalising all contents to 100% as it is done in the classical procedure. As the amount of removed material is not the same for each ablation, the signal obtained for each trace element for the different ablations was compared to that of the internal standard: the isotope **Si. Accuracy error calculated by Gratuze et al. (2001) is usually better than 12% for trace elements, but could reach 20% for trace elements below ppm level. With this method, a significant number of trace elements (up to 39) are quantified in the SI.

2.3. Methodology for identifying a provenance

Previous studies (Desaulty, 2008; Desaulty et al., 2009) showed that some trace element concentrations are not significantly affected during smelting and partition equally between metal and slag, consequently conserving their respective concentration ratio. These specific elements can be used to define an elemental signature of a given ore extraction area. To define the elemental signature of the Ariège area and identify the origin of an iron artefact, the following steps were applied:

- (1) Examination of the MnO and P₂O₅ contents as a first filter.
- (2) Application of multivariate analyses to compare elemental signatures based on trace elements selected to define the signature of the Ariège area.

2.3.1. First filter of the MnO and P₂O₅ contents

Since the content of the major elements is influenced by other components of the reduction system (furnace lining, charcoal ash...) than the ore, the ratios of NRC (mainly Al₂O₃/SiO₂, K₂O/CaO, MgO/Al₂O₃) are generally highly scattered even for objects of a same provenance (Dillmann and L'Héritier, 2007; Blakelock et al., 2009). Nevertheless, the absolute content of particular major elements, e.g. MnO and/or P₂O₅, that come from the ore and are not or only slightly modified during the smelt can be used as a first raw filter (Desaulty et al., 2009). Because a part of the iron from the ore is reduced into metal during the smelting, some concentration effects can occur from the initial ore to the slag (and SI), hence a correction has to be made. We decided to normalise the elemental contents to 100% excluding FeO (Fig. 5). These normalised composition values will be denoted by the ** symbol, and calculated as follows: %Oxide** = (Oxide × 100)/(100 – FeO) for ore and slag samples and %Oxide** = (Oxide × 100)/(100 – FeO*) for SI. The purpose of this normalisation is to enable the direct comparison of concentrations in ores, slags and SI, as visible in Fig. 5. The Ariègean ores are well known for their high MnO and low P₂O₅ contents (Ploquin, 2000; Verna, 2001). We therefore defined the limits of MnO** and P₂O₅** composition domains to be used as a first filter, from the examination of the ores, slags and SI from the Ariège area.

![Figure 3](image-url) Average composition in major elements from geological and archaeological ores from the Ariège area. Thin bars represent the minimum and maximum values. All data from SEM-EDS.

2.3.2. Multivariate analyses

Among the elements that were shown to be lithophilic and not significantly contaminated by other parts of the furnace charge, only a restricted set could be quantified with an acceptable accuracy of measurement at the concentrations observed in Ariegean samples: Y, Nb, Cs, La, Ce, Nd, Sm, Eu, Yb, Hf, Th, U. This full set of elements was used to define the Ariegean signature.

Our multivariate analysis of the elemental signature is based on a scale invariant representation of the trace elements concentration: in this representation, the signature stays constant when all concentrations are multiplied by a constant scaling factor; hence it stays constant along the reduction process. Such a scale invariant representation can be obtained by dividing the concentration of all elements by the concentration in a given element, chosen as internal standard. Here we propose to use not a single element but the geometrical mean of the set of best measured elements as the internal standard; the main advantage being to reduce the uncertainties on the internal standard. For each element, $E_k$, we represent its concentration $[E]$ by Eq. (1):

$$X_E = \log([E]) - \frac{1}{N} \sum_{k=1}^{N} \log([E_k])$$

where the elements $([E_k])_{k=1}^{N}$ are the $N$ best measured elements, jointly for all considered samples. In the current study these elements are Y, La, Ce, Sm and Eu ($N = 5$); each of those elements...
Fig. 6. Diagram of compatibility applied to the artefacts collected on the castles and at the Collegiate church of Capestang. The dotted lines show the $D_{\text{max}}$ and $D_{\text{quart}}$ thresholds.

elements are below the detection limit in less than 2% of the performed analyses. We also have to ignore one of those elements in this scale invariant representation since, by construction, we have the following linear dependence (Eq. (2)):

$$\sum_{k=1}^{N} X_{k} = 0$$

(2)

We selected arbitrarily the element Eu that has the highest atomic number.

The use of a logarithmic scale is advantageous here to convert the relatively uniform relative uncertainties into uniform absolute uncertainties which are more appropriate for the linear analysis we are about to perform.

Using this representation, the problem we face is a supervised classification problem: we compare the elemental composition of a small set of all analysed SI from the studied object to the data obtained from ore, slag and objects of known origin. For objects of known origin, we considered an average value for the SI to not amplify the influence of the objects compared to ore and slag for the definition of the Ariegean signature. The dimension of the problem, here $12$, is large relative to the number of data in the reference corpus, in the range of a hundred. To reduce the variance, we project the data on the most discriminating direction (LD-1) between the two classes of data: datapoints from the studied object’s SI on one hand (Obj), datapoints from ores, slags and artefacts known to originate from the region of interest on the other (Ref).

The experimental design is such that a standard analysis such as principal components analysis (PCA) would provide little if any information, the dataset being largely dominated by the reference corpus, such an analysis would maximise the spread of the artefacts from the reference corpus rather than performing any discrimination between the studied object and the reference corpus. Hence we decided to take an alternative approach: Linear Discriminant Analysis (LDA). Under the hypothesis ($H_0$) that the studied object is not originating from the same region as the reference corpus, the large dimension of the problem generally enables the LDA to perform a clear separation between the two classes: the separation under this hypothesis dominates stochastically the separation under the alternative hypothesis ($H_1$), that the elemental signature of the studied object is compatible with the region of the reference corpus. The two extreme values of the projections of Ref on LD-1 are selected to delimit the extension of the definition domain of the reference region. Practically, the separation between the two classes is measured through two distances: from the median point of Obj to the closest extreme point of Ref, and from the third quartile of Obj to the closest extreme point of Ref, respectively noted $D_{med}$ and $D_{quart}$. These distances are depicted in Fig. 2.

Since we lack an estimation of the probability distribution of these distances, we have to calibrate the threshold for the test using the calibrating set of objects of known origin divided in a second subset of objects known to be originate outside the region of the reference corpus. The first subset of objects was initially integrated in the reference corpus to define the Ariegean chemical signatures. That is why each of these objects was temporarily left out of the reference corpus $Ref$, when comparing $Ref$ to Obj.

Clearly the obtained thresholds depend on the objects used in the calibrating process and as such they will evolve as the number of artefacts studied with this methodology increases. Threshold values also depend on the exact implementation of the LDA method used.

The construction of the two distances partitions the plane ($D_{med}$, $D_{quart}$) in 3 regions as depicted in Fig. 7: compatible, incompatible and undetermined, therefore leading to a compatibility diagram. Objects in the compatible domain were fabricated from ores likely coming from the region of interest. Objects in the incompatible domain were fabricated from ores likely coming from outside the region of interest. Finally this process does not lead to origin information when the object is in the undetermined domain of the ($D_{med}$, $D_{quart}$) plan.

For compatible objects from archaeological sites within the Ariège area, the proximity of the object trace elemental signature to those of each sample of the reference corpus can be assessed using the Euclidean distance in the $X_k$ space. In particular this distance can be used to perform hierarchical clustering analysis (HCA) of the set made of the union of the samples of the reference corpus and the mean $X_k$ of the SI of the studied object. Note that ore and slag samples with several elemental contents below the limit of detection cause scattering in the chemical signature of the reference corpus since their position in the $X_k$ space is estimated with large inaccuracy.

3. Results

3.1. Major elements

Analysis of the major elemental composition of the geological and archaeologically excavated ores in the Ariège area confirms that they are characterised by their high manganese content (average: 3.8 wt%, lowest: 1 wt%) and their low phosphorus content (average: 0.2 wt%, highest: 0.7 wt%) (Fig. 3). The MnO and P2O5 compositions of ores and slags from the Ariège area were compared to those from various iron-making areas in France, analysed in Leroy (2010) or provided by the PalSid (PaléoSidérurgie) database (Ploquin, 1994): Pays-de-Bray, Lombardy and Dauphiné (French Alps) (Fig. 4). The MnO content in samples of some areas (Ariège, Lombardy, Dauphiné) is shown to be higher than the ore and slag compositions in other areas (Lorraine, Pays-de-Bray). P2O5 contents are lower (<2 wt%) compared to samples from the Lorraine region well known for its P2O5-rich ore (Leroy, 1997). This comparison confirms that the Ariegean elemental signature is characterised by high MnO and low P2O5 contents.

The MnO** and P2O5** values measured in ores and slags from the Ariège reference corpus were shown to be consistent with MnO** and P2O5** values from SI of the same set (Fig. 5). We can therefore define the first filter of the Ariège area for P2O5 and MnO based on the observed cluster. The lowest observed MnO** value is 2.7 wt%. Thus, to maintain a sufficient safety margin, we will consider in the following that artefacts with average SI MnO content leading to MnO** value below 2 wt% are not compatible with the Ariège signature. The highest observed P2O5** value is 6.6 wt%. As a limited contamination in P2O5 could come from the charcoal (Crew, 2000; Serneels, 2002), we will arbitrarily consider that P2O5** values greater than 9 wt% preclude an Ariège provenance.

The MnO** and P2O5** values measured in artefacts of unidentified origin were compared to the Ariegean signature. All objects were shown to be located in the Ariègean domain except artefact MdS29431 which MnO** value is below 1 wt% (Fig. 5).

3.2. Trace elements: diagram of compatibility

3.2.1. Construction of the Ariegean diagram

The $D_{med}$ and $D_{quart}$ values obtained for all objects of known origin (calibrating set) and Ariègean samples as reference set are compared and reported in Table 4:

- For the artefacts coming from the Ariège area, the highest measured $D_{med}$ and $D_{quart}$ values are respectively 0.27 and 0.01.
- For the artefacts not coming from the Ariège area, $D_{med}$ and $D_{quart}$ values are significantly higher than those above and the
Fig. 7. Hierarchical clustering analysis carried out jointly on the reference set and the group of artefacts of unknown origin compatible with the Ariegean elemental signature. Dotted line: threshold of groups discrimination. Samples in bold: artefacts of unknown origin. Samples not bordered: samples with several elemental contents below the limit of detection, these samples are exclusively ore samples. Samples bordered in grey, branches linked in grey: samples from the iron-production sites of Castel-Minier, Lercoul and Savignac. Samples with a grey background: samples from the Riverenert site. Samples bordered in black, branches linked in black: samples associated with MIR7.

The lowest measured \( D_{\text{med}} \) and \( D_{\text{quart}} \) values are 1.16 and 0.92 respectively.

These extreme values can now be used to discriminate artefacts originating from the Ariège area from those with another provenance. In the following, this study will therefore consider that:

- The tested artefacts are likely made from ores of the Ariège area when the \( D_{\text{med}} \) and \( D_{\text{quart}} \) values are respectively lower than 0.27 and 0.01.
- The tested artefacts are likely based on ores originating from outside the Ariège area when the \( D_{\text{med}} \) and \( D_{\text{quart}} \) values are respectively higher than 1.16 and 0.92.

### 3.2.2. Application of the Ariegean compatibility diagram

The diagram of compatibility with an Ariegean origin, built with the values of Table 4, is used to test the hypothesis of provenance from Ariège for objects of unidentified origin (Fig. 6, Table 5).

Among the 34 archaeological artefacts retained after the first filter, fourteen are located in the compatible domain. Note that both samples from the Capestang Collegiate church (CAP1 and CAP3) also belong to the compatible domain and consequently could have been produced from an iron ore extracted in the Ariège area. Seven specimens belong to the undetermined domain for which no clear conclusion on the ore origin can be drawn: an origin from the Ariège area is neither excluded nor confirmed for these artefacts. Thirteen objects belong to the incompatible domain so that these artefacts appear to be of a different ore origin, most probably imported to the Ariège area.

### 3.3. Distinction between iron mines within the Ariège area

Considering the artefacts defined as compatible with the Ariège area, we tested the possibility to distinguish their initial ore deposits by hierarchical clustering analysis (Fig. 7). The primary aim is to discriminate artefacts fabricated from the two main ore Ariègean sources, Riverenert and Mont Rancié. The discriminating threshold of the HCA was set from visualisation of the dendrogram.

The main homogeneous group contains samples from the iron-production sites of Castel-Minier, Lercoul and Savigac supplied with ores extracted from the Mont Rancié mine (Téreygeol, 2009; Dubois, 2000; Grimbert, 2006). Slag samples collected from the Riverenert site form a distinct group. The dendrogram shows that the majority of the artefacts of unknown origin and compatible with the Ariègean elemental signature are located in the group of the Mont Rancié rather than in that of Riverenert. Sample MIR7 is the only one located in the group of the Riverenert mine and was probably produced with ore coming from this mine.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
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<tr>
<td>( D_{\text{med}} ) and ( D_{\text{quart}} ) values calculated for all objects of known origin (calibrating set, see Table 2). In bold: extreme values for each subset of samples.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Artefacts coming from the Ariège area</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Artefacts not coming from the Ariège area</strong></td>
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*The incompatibility of artefact MdS29431 was obtained from the first filter of the MnO\(^{\text{II}}\) and P\(_2\)O\(_5\)\(^{\text{VII}}\) values.

### 4. Discussion

The following discussion is focused on archaeological and historical questions raised by the results of the present study. We will chiefly discuss here the supply of iron ores. We will separately consider the sites located in valleys supplied with ore from Rancié (Montréal-de-Sos, Castel-Minier) and the sites located in the Couserans (Mirabat, Sainte-Catherine).

At Montréal-de-Sos, three of twelve objects are of undetermined origin after the analysis: an architectural nail, a mule iron and a knife. Five out of the twelve studied objects are compatible with iron ores from Mont Rancié. Nevertheless, despite iron-production workshops using local ore being located very near the castle, four out of the twelve iron artefacts transpired to have a non-local origin. Excavation studies showed that Montréal-de-Sos became a central place in the supervision of activities related to metallurgy in the 14th century (Guillot, 2008) exactly as Castel-Minier in another valley. The Montréal-de-Sos castle is rather isolated but located not far from the major trade route to Andorra (Verna, 2001, 2005; Fig. 8). Textual sources mention the circulation along this route of objects of various origins. In particular, exchanges of precious knives from Parma are attested in the 15th century in the Vicdessos (Verna, 2001: p. 153). Therefore, we may assume that some of these products may end on the site. Our results, showing a variety of distinct origins for the ferrous artefacts found at the site, perfectly support this historical vision.

For the Castel-Minier castle, the results give a different overview. The objects found on the site were fabricated almost

exclusively with the ore from the Mont Rancié mine, independently
of the type of artefact (nail, ring, but also a chisel found in the silver
mine of the site). Two out of eight objects are not made out of
iron ore from the Mont Rancié, among which one could be a frag-
ment of horseshoes and thus mobile artefact by definition. Histor-
al studies revealed that, from the 14th century onward and in
agreement with the exchange treaty concluded in 1347
and 1348, ore
from the Mont Rancié supplied, through the Lers pass, the
moulins
of the Ercé and Massat valleys in the Couserans. Besides, the ore
from the Vicedossos valley does not come freely in these valleys but
is the result of a controlled distribution (Verna, 2001). Due to its
location near the Lers pass (Fig. 8), the production of the mouline
of Castel-Minier would be entirely dependent on this ore supply. In
addition, the site occupied a particular position at the bottom of
a valley in the Couserans region and is not close to a major circu-
lation path where objects of different origin could be found. Our
results clearly reflect this situation. Due to the extreme isolation
of the site, the presence of external supplies seems to be much rarer at
Castel-Minier than at Montréal-de-Sos.

Focusing on more distant sites from the Vicedossos, in the Cou-
serans, the Mirabat castle in particular, leads to a different picture.
Admittedly, the set of samples consists only of nails and conse-
quently might be relatively biased as these objects can be fabricated
in abundance everywhere. An important issue to stress is that only
one nail presumably comes from the Ariège area (MIR7). In addi-
tion, our hierarchical clustering analysis shows that this artefact
would have been made from ore extracted from the local deposits
at Riverenert, and not from ore from Mont Rancié. This is consist-
ent with the distance between the two sites of Riverenert and Mirabat
being only 15 km. There is a clear lack of historical data about the
circulation of iron in the region. Extrapolating our results, most iron
found in this part of the Couserans would originate from other
regions than Mont Rancié which would bring interesting new
insight by supporting the hypothesis that the strength of the
exchange treaty that obliged moulins in the Mont Rancié area of
influence to use its ore — seems to have the side effect to exclude
the use of this ore in the Couserans.

A last aim of our work was to study the circulation of iron from
the Vicedossos beyond the production area, in the context of
regional exchanges. The presence of iron made with ores from the
Vicedossos in the construction of a prestigious building, such as the
collegiate church of Capestang was highlighted. This result would
confirm that Narbonne received iron produced in the Vicedossos as
demonstrated for other products, such as textiles and pastel (Verna,
2001). Our analysis shows that a part of iron from the Vicedossos was
used in the area dominated by Narbonne which opens the way to
finer historical and material studies on the socio-political and
socioeconomic issues controlling iron supply for the building of
medieval monuments.

5. Conclusion

The present study reveals the potential of a methodology based
on the combination of trace elemental and multivariate analyses to
examine the provenance of iron artefacts. In addition to previous
works on the study of ore geographical origin, the presented
methodology renders possible the validation of a given provenance.
A limitation is that this methodology requires the collection and the
treatment of a large quantity of data.

Here, as a first stage, to compare the elemental signatures of
a given ore extraction area with the ones of objects of unidentified
origin, a filter of absolute contents of Mn and P oxides was used. It
allows the exclusion of artefacts smelted from an ore that does not
have a signature characterised by these major elements. In a second

Fig. 8. Synthesis of the origin of objects uncovered on castles within Ariège and at the collegiate church of Capestang. Dates are speci-
fied for each trade route since different periods
are considered. Circular diagrams: origin of the artefacts. The figures within the diagrams indicate the number of artefacts associated to each category of origin. Major circulation
routes of the iron ore are derived from Verna (2001).
stage, the determination of an object origin is based on a prove-
nance compatibility diagram established using linear discriminant
analysis projections coupled with an empirical calibration. The
threshold values used in the area inclusion/exclusion process are
experimentally determined from our data. These values change as
a function of the set of artefacts of known origin used in the cali-

bation process, be it from the area of interest or out of it. Due to the
relatively small set of artefacts in the calibration, a large confidence
interval had to be used leading to a large undetermined sector in the
compatibility abacus described. Increasing the base on which these
thresholds are determined should lead to better discrimina-

tion. For that purpose, new analytical data must be gathered on
objects of known ore origin, coming from the area studied and from
elsewhere.

This method was used on samples recovered in different
archaeological sites within the Ariège area but also outside this
region, in the vicinity of Narbonne. Some characteristics of the
Ariègean iron market sensed by the historical sources were thus
detailed. First, the complexity of the iron market in the Vicedosses
valley, from an economical point of view, was pointed out thanks to
the analysis of objects excavated from a castle located near the
Mont Rancié mine (Montréal-de-Sos castle). The observed diversity

of origins is related to the site location that is close to the trade
routes. In the Couserans area, the political control over the supply
of the ore from the Mont Rancié in the Erce and Massat valleys
during the 14th–15th centuries has been highlighted through our
approaches (Castel-Minier castle). Our results have demonstrated that
the majority of iron from West of the Couserans was smelted
unidentified for the time being. By revealing a consistency with the
available historical and archaeological data, the results consolidate
the validity of the methodology. Finally, by applying this new
approach our results enriched the description of the Ariègean iron
market. This work underlines that iron from the Vicedosses is
present among the building materials of the St-Etienne collegiate
church of Capestang, in the neighbourhood of Narbonne. The
exportation of iron from Foix towards the East is therefore
confirmed.

This new methodology will permit to better understand the iron
market in the Couserans for which textual sources have not
survived. To this aim, one must also consider other production
areas identified by history and archaeology as potential iron
suppliers in the Ariège area (Catalonia, Minervois, Comminges,
Roussillon). To understand the diffusion of the iron from the Vici-
dosses, the study of iron from constructions built outside of the
production area of Ariège and in different regions, is also crucial.

The authors would finally like to emphasise that all provenance
studies must be supported by well-developed historical and
archaeological contexts, and an in-depth preliminary metallurgical
study of the objects and samples.

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Appendix. Supplementary material

Supplementary material associated with this article can be

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