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### Drought mitigation by thinning

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1           **Drought mitigation by thinning: benefits from the stem to the stand along 15 years of**  
2                                   **experimental rainfall exclusion in a holm oak coppice**

3  
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16 **Keywords:** *Quercus ilex*; drought resistance; tree mortality; stool density; climate change;  
17           **adaptive management; stem growth; resprouting; ecosystem manipulation**

18

19 **Abstract**

20 In northern Mediterranean forests, increasing drought stress due to the on-going climate change is  
21 combined with stand ageing due to the lack of management. Management by thinning may alleviate  
22 drought stress by reducing competition, but its application is challenging in coppices of resprouting  
23 species where its long-term consequences for tree demography and stand dynamics are difficult to  
24 evaluate. In this study, we investigate the long-term (15 years) demographic responses of holm oak  
25 (*Quercus ilex* L.) to a combination of thinning from below (-30% basal area) and experimental rainfall  
26 exclusion (-27% precipitation). Stem growth, survival and resistance to an extreme drought event were  
27 positively linked to both stem size and local competition release after thinning. Thinning improvement  
28 of growth and survival were thus due to both a selection of the biggest, most vigorous, trees and to a  
29 release of competition for water. Rainfall exclusion, on the other hand, led to a shift of the tree size-  
30 mortality relationship, which resulted in the death of bigger trees, in a faster loss of stool density and in  
31 a slower evolution of the stand basal area compared to the control. Thinning was beneficial by cancelling  
32 the rainfall exclusion effects on growth and mortality, and by doubling the stand basal area increment  
33 compared to unthinned control. The initial loss of stools due to thinning was compensated by a lower  
34 mortality, suggesting that thinning do not reduce further the amount of unique genotypes on the long-  
35 term. Positive thinning effects on stem growth decreased over time but remained significant 15 years  
36 after thinning, while resprouting dynamics strongly decreased with time. These results indicate that  
37 moderate thinning from below is a relevant strategy to increase stem vitality and stand production in old  
38 coppices, particularly in a context of a chronic rise in drought stress and more frequent extreme drought  
39 episodes.

## 40 **1. Introduction**

41 Forest ecosystems are currently facing fast changes, such as unprecedented climatic conditions and land-  
42 use changes, that already affect tree growth, mortality and reproduction (Allen et al., 2010; Doblas-  
43 Miranda et al., 2017; Linares et al., 2009; McDowell and Allen, 2015). Such changes are expected to  
44 further accelerate in the future and strongly challenge current forest management practices (Keenan,  
45 2015; Millar et al., 2007; Stephens et al., 2010). Decreasing stand density by thinning is traditionally  
46 used to improve residual tree growth and dimensions, but it has gained a renewed interest as an adaptive  
47 management practice aiming at improving forest resistance or resilience to drought (Bottero et al., 2016;  
48 Navarro-Cerrillo et al., 2019; Vilà-Cabrera et al., 2018). By reducing stand leaf area, thinning is  
49 expected to reduce rainfall interception and stand transpiration, thereby improving water availability for  
50 the remaining trees (Bréda et al., 1995; del Campo et al., 2014; Giuggiola et al., 2015). Reduced  
51 competition for water after thinning has been shown to increase mean tree growth and to reduce growth  
52 vulnerability to extreme drought events (Aldea et al., 2017; Bottero et al., 2016), although with a high  
53 variability depending on species, climate and thinning intensity (Sohn et al., 2016b). How thinning  
54 regimes, i.e. their frequency, intensity and the characteristics of the trees harvested affect the forest  
55 resistance to drought is still poorly known. Thinning effects on tree growth and mortality strongly  
56 depend on individual characteristics such as tree size and local competitive environment (Bose et al.,  
57 2018), which also affect the drought responses (Bennett et al., 2015; Colangelo et al., 2017; Trouvé et  
58 al., 2014). Furthermore, positive thinning effects may vanish after a few years (Bréda et al., 1995;  
59 Cotillas et al., 2009; del Campo et al., 2019; Sánchez-Humanes and Espelta, 2011), and even reverse in  
60 the long-term (D'Amato et al., 2013) because stand leaf area can quickly recover to its pre-thinning  
61 values either by an increase in tree leaf area (Bréda et al., 1995; Giuggiola et al., 2013) or by the  
62 development of understory vegetation following increased light availability (Gebhardt et al., 2014;  
63 Simonin et al., 2007). Thinning is also accompanied by an increase in light, temperature and evaporative  
64 demand in the canopy and understory (Gavinet et al., 2015; Lechuga et al., 2017), possibly resulting in  
65 increased water losses by evapotranspiration that can reduce or offset thinning benefits for water  
66 availability (del Campo et al., 2019; Gebhardt et al., 2014). Moreover, when thinning reduces population  
67 sizes too strongly, genetic drift may lead to the loss of rare alleles and restrict local adaptation processes  
68 (Lefèvre et al., 2014). Thinning is thus generally considered as a short-term adaptation option (Vilà-  
69 Cabrera et al., 2018), and thinning regimes are to be determined depending on species, stand type and  
70 site conditions (Ameztegui et al., 2017; Skov et al. 2009; Sohn et al. 2016b).

71 Whether thinning is a suitable strategy to improve tree vitality and resistance to stress in resprouting  
72 stands is not straightforward because an important resprouting dynamic can take place after thinning  
73 and quickly offset the benefits of competition reduction (Cotillas et al., 2009; Ducrey, 1996; Ducrey and  
74 Toth, 1992). The resprouting ability allows trees to persist under disturbances or drought (Bond and  
75 Midgley, 2001; Clarke et al., 2010; Zeppel et al., 2015) and is widespread in broadleaved species such

76 as Mediterranean oaks. These oak forests represent the main late-successional stands around the  
77 Mediterranean basin (Quézel & Médail 2003), and because of their strong resprouting ability, they have  
78 been generally managed as coppices for the provision of fuel wood, charcoal or tannins. With rural  
79 abandonment and the decreasing use of firewood and charcoal as energy sources, oak coppices have  
80 been progressively abandoned since the middle of the XXth century and form now ageing stands with  
81 frequent signs of dieback, lack of seed regeneration and low levels of productivity (Camarero et al.,  
82 2016; Gentilesca et al., 2017). Besides, in coppice stands, the long history of coppicing has led to  
83 complex forest structures comprising both unique genets and multi-stemmed clumps (Valbuena-  
84 Carabaña et al., 2008), where individual stem growth and vigour are also influenced by stool  
85 characteristics (Salomón et al., 2013). Whether management by thinning could improve productivity  
86 and drought resistance of aged oak coppices in the long-term remains to be determined, especially in a  
87 context of climate change pushing drought stress beyond its historical range. Thinning from below at a  
88 moderate intensity, i.e. by removing the smallest suppressed stems and by keeping at least one stem on  
89 multi-stemmed stools, may limit resprouting and maintain stand-level productivity (Cabon et al., 2018b;  
90 Ducrey, 1996) as well as a large population size of unique genets. This type of thinning from below can  
91 additionally decrease fire risk by limiting the vertical continuity of the vegetation cover and limit the  
92 impact on understory temperature and evaporative demand. Thinning from below has potentially two  
93 types of effects: the selected trees are the biggest, which are often more vigorous and more efficient in  
94 resource acquisition and transformation (Binkley et al., 2004), while the removal of small trees can  
95 release the competition for belowground resources (Cabon et al., 2018b; Giuggiola et al., 2018).  
96 However, the relative importance of size-selection and competition release, the influence of stool-level  
97 variables, and the impact of thinning on genetic diversity on the long-term remain to be described in a  
98 context of increasing drought.

99 In this study, we investigate the effects of thinning on holm oak growth, mortality, resprouting and stool  
100 diversity under ambient and increased drought severity, by using a 15-year experiment in a mature  
101 coppice combining rainfall exclusion (-27% of incoming precipitations) and thinning from below (-30%  
102 basal area). A previous study after 5 years of treatment showed that thinning improved tree growth and  
103 survival but also increased tree resprouting, suggesting that thinning effect could be quickly offset by  
104 resprouting (Rodríguez-Calcerrada et al., 2011). Ten years later, we aimed to i) analyse the long-term  
105 evolution of thinning effects and resprouting dynamics, ii) understand the individual characteristics  
106 driving tree demographic rates (growth, survival, resprouting) and their response to drought and iii)  
107 explore the stand-level evolution of basal area, stem density and stool density – which relates to the  
108 number of unique genotypes – under the different treatments.

## 109 2. Material & method

### 110 2.1. Experimental site

111 The experiment was conducted in southern France (35 km northwest of Montpellier), on a flat area in  
112 the Puéchabon State Forest (43°44'29'' N; 3°35'46'' E, 270 m a.s.l.). This forest has been coppiced for  
113 centuries with clear cuts approximately every 25 years, until the last clear cut in 1942. The evergreen  
114 *Quercus ilex* L. forms a dense canopy with a height of c. 5.5 m, a mean basal area of 30 m<sup>2</sup>.ha<sup>-1</sup> and a  
115 density of c. 6000 stems. ha<sup>-1</sup>, representing c. 4000 genetically different individuals (stools).ha<sup>-1</sup>. The  
116 evergreen species *Buxus sempervirens*, *Phyllirea latifolia*, *Pistacia terebinthus* and *Juniperus*  
117 *oxycedrus*, compose a sparse understory layer with c. 20% cover and represent less than 3% of stand  
118 basal area. The bedrock is a hard Jurassic limestone and the soil is extremely rocky with c. 75% of stones  
119 and rocks in the top 0–50 cm and 90% below. The stone-free fraction of the soil within the 0–50 cm  
120 layer is a homogeneous silty clay loam (38.8% clay, 35.2% silt and 26% sand). The area has a  
121 Mediterranean-type climate with a mean annual temperature of 13.2°C (on-site meteorological station,  
122 1984-2017), the coldest month being January (5.5°C) and the hottest month July (22.9°C). The mean  
123 annual precipitation is 910 mm with a range of 550 - 1549 mm (1984-2017). Rainfall mainly occurs  
124 during autumn and winter with about 80% between September and April.

### 125 2.2 Experimental design: rainfall exclusion and thinning experiments

126 In March 2003, a factorial combination of throughfall exclusion and thinning treatments was set up on  
127 three 20 × 20 m replicated blocks located 200m apart one from the other. Each block comprises four  
128 treatments applied on a 10 × 10 m plot: control, throughfall exclusion (further “dry”), thinned, and  
129 thinned with throughfall exclusion (further “thinned dry”). For the throughfall exclusion treatment, half  
130 of the block was equipped with parallel 14m long and 0.19m wide PVC gutters hung below the canopy  
131 with a slope, between 1m and 2m in height, so as to cover 33% of the ground area under the tree canopy.  
132 Taking into account rainfall interception and stemflow, the net input of precipitation was reduced by  
133 27% compared with the control plots (Limousin et al., 2008). On the other half of the blocks, identical  
134 gutters were installed upside down to homogenize albedo and understorey micro-climate without  
135 reducing precipitation inputs. Thinning from below was applied once, in winter 2003, on half of the  
136 plots by removing 30% of the initial plot basal area (27% of *Q. ilex* basal area, Table 1), thereby reducing  
137 the stem density by 49 % and stool density by 36% (Table 1). Dead, diseased and suppressed stems were  
138 felled and the understory cleared. One to four stems were cut on multi-stemmed stumps, in order to  
139 leave the larger stems. Thinning resulted in an increase of the mean *Q. ilex* stem diameter by 25% (Table  
140 1). Measures of pre-dawn water potential on a subsample of trees during the first 5 years of the  
141 experiment confirmed that rainfall exclusion increased tree water stress while thinning decreased it  
142 (Rodríguez-Calcerrada et al., 2011).

### 143 2.3 Demographic data

144 In each plot, stems with a diameter at breast height (DBH) larger than 2 cm were individually tagged,  
145 mapped and their DBH was measured before and after treatment application in March 2003.  
146 Neighboring trees located within a 3m band around the blocks were also measured to assess the  
147 competitive environment of the trees inside the plots. Annual inventories of stem DBH were then  
148 conducted every winter from 2004 to 2019 with a diameter tape. Annual stem basal area increments  
149 were calculated for each year  $n$  from 2003 to 2018 as  $BAI_n = \frac{\pi}{4}(DBH_{n+1}^2 - DBH_n^2)$ . Trees were  
150 recorded as dead when only brown leaves remained on the tree without crown regreening during the  
151 following years. Resprouts were inventoried twice, in 2008 and 2018. For each stump, the number of  
152 resprouts, the diameter of all resprouts and the height of the dominant resprout were measured. We  
153 considered the resprouts taller than 1.30m as established resprouts. None of them reached the threshold  
154 of 2cm DBH to be considered as recruits.

#### 155 *2.4 Stool identification and clonal structure*

156 The stool clonal structure of the coppice was visually assessed during the first inventory by grouping as  
157 clones the stems that were visibly connected to the same stump and root system. This assessment was  
158 facilitated by the shallow and rocky soil of the site where the stumps are generally clearly visible above  
159 the ground. This visual census of genetically different individuals was then confirmed by genetic  
160 analyses performed in 2018 on a subsample of 166 individuals selected in the denser unthinned plots.  
161 Leaves were collected on one stem of every identified stump and frozen on dry ice. The DNA was  
162 extracted using DNeasy 96 Plant kit (QIAGEN GmbH, Hilden, Germany) and genotyping was  
163 performed using 70 validated SNPs markers (Bonal et al., 2019) developed from ddRAD-Seq data by  
164 the Genome Transcriptome Facility of Bordeaux (PGTB) following the methods described in García et  
165 al. (2018). To be considered clones, individuals had to be compared at more than 50 loci with exact  
166 matching of their SNP markers. The results confirmed the relative reliability of the visual assessment as  
167 only 25 individuals among the 166 sampled were unidentified clones (15% of undetected clones). The  
168 mean distance between unidentified clones was 1.05 m and never exceeded 3 m (see a map of one block  
169 in Fig. S1). These results show that stools extent was spatially restricted and that it could reliably be  
170 described from visual inventories. We therefore decided to retain the visual stool identification as a  
171 proxy for the number of genetically different individuals within the coppice.

#### 172 *2.5 Competition indexes*

173 We calculated the stem-level competition index as the sum of the neighbors' basal area in a 3m radius  
174 around each stem (BA<sub>n</sub>). BA<sub>n</sub> is a distance-independent, size-symmetric competition index. Size  
175 symmetric competition occurs when each tree exerts a competitive effect proportional to its size. This  
176 is typically assumed to be the case when belowground resources such as water are the main limitation.  
177 We also computed other widely used competition indexes: two size and distance-dependent competition  
178 indexes, the Hegyi competition index (Hegyi, 1974) and the Weiner competition index (Weiner, 1984)

179 and the size asymmetric index Basal Area of Larger trees within a 3m radius (BAL). The models  
180 including these indexes were however always less performant than with BAn (lower or similar  $R^2$ , higher  
181 AIC, with particularly no effect of BAL, data not shown). We thus retained BAn to characterize the  
182 local competition intensity as this index is simpler and not related to tree size, allowing us to separate  
183 mechanisms of competition and size-selection. We tested the effect of competition absolute values  
184 (BAn) and competition release, expressed as the percentage of BAn removed by thinning or neighbor's  
185 mortality.

## 186 *2.6 Data analysis*

187 Annual stem basal area increment (BAI) were averaged over the 15 years of the experiment for each  
188 tree. This mean growth variable was first analysed as a function of thinning, rainfall exclusion and their  
189 interaction using a linear model. Then, we constructed a stem growth model as a function of individual  
190 characteristics using stem size in interaction with indexes of competition intensity (BAn), competition  
191 release (percentage difference of BAn before and after thinning, see above) and rainfall exclusion as  
192 explanatory variables. Thinning was not included in these latter models because it was redundant with  
193 competition indices and strongly inflated models VIF (Zuur et al., 2010). We selected the best model  
194 based on the Akaike criterion (AIC). When AIC difference between two models was lower than 2, we  
195 considered the models equivalent and selected the most parsimonious one. The variance explained by  
196 each of the predictors was assessed using the R package relaimpo (Grömping, 2006). Finally, the  
197 temporal evolution of treatment effects on tree growth was analysed by separating the dataset in three  
198 5-years periods and analysing stem growth as a function of treatments, period and their interactions  
199 using a linear mixed model with stem identity as a random factor in order to account for repeated  
200 measures. In all models, stem growth was log-transformed to satisfy conditions of normality and  
201 homoscedasticity.

202 Holm oak stem and stool mortality was analysed similarly as a function of i) treatments and ii) individual  
203 characteristics. Mortality probability was modelled using a logistic regression with a logit link. Rainfall  
204 exclusion effect on the diameter of dead trees in unthinned plots was tested with a t-test.

205 The year 2006 had the driest spring season over the course of the experiment, with only 52mm of  
206 precipitations between April and June (average 2003 – 2018 = 211mm). Spring water limitation has  
207 been shown to be the most important environmental factor for stem growth and stand productivity in  
208 our site (Gavinet et al., 2019; Lempereur et al., 2015). We thus used data from the year 2006 to quantify  
209 the impact of an extreme drought event on individual stem growth. We calculated the drought resistance  
210 for each stem as the ratio of stem growth in 2006 to mean growth in the three preceding years (Lloret et  
211 al., 2011). Drought resistance was analyzed as described for stem BAI and mortality as a function of  
212 rainfall exclusion and thinning treatments, then as a function of individual characteristics. Drought  
213 resistance was log-transformed to obtain normal residuals and 13 outliers were discarded, corresponding



214 to stems with either a negative BAI in 2006 (typically due to a measurement error) or a mean BAI during  
215 the preceding years almost null, 8 of which died some years later.

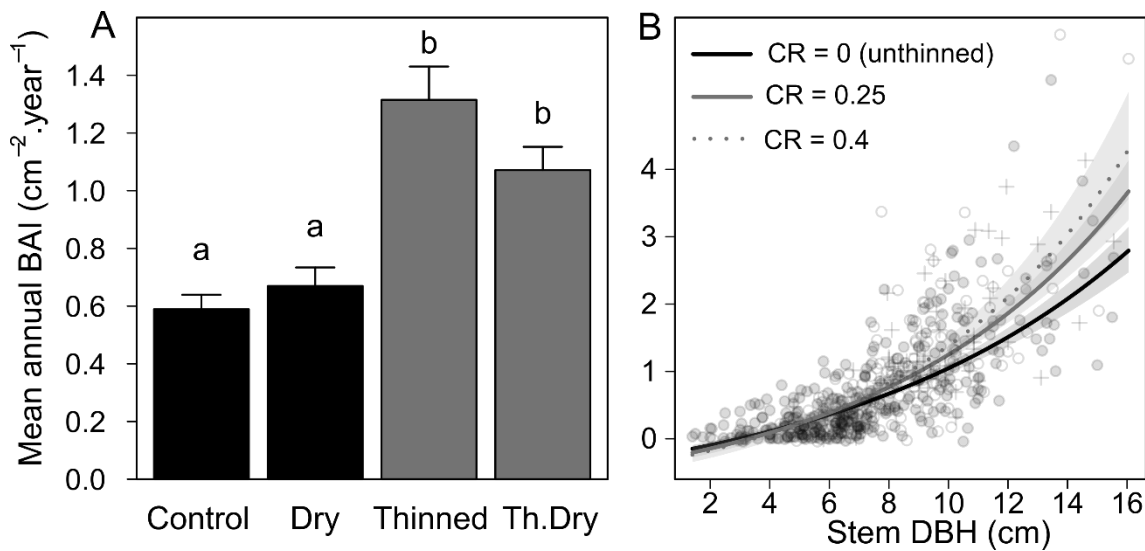
216 Resprouts number, maximum height and total basal area per stool were analysed as a function of rainfall  
217 exclusion, thinning treatments, inventory date (5 and 15 years after thinning) and their interaction, using  
218 stool identity as a random factor to account for repeated measures. A negative binomial distribution was  
219 used for the number of resprouts to account for overdispersion (function `glmer.nb` of the R package  
220 `lme4`), and linear mixed models were used for log-transformed resprout height and basal area. When  
221 interactions between factors were significant, we performed Tukey post-hoc tests. Then, we modelled  
222 resprout basal area (the most integrative index of resprout dynamics) as a function of stool size and the  
223 percentage of stool basal area that had been cut by thinning (stool competition release).

224 To examine treatment effects at the stand-level, we calculated for each year and plot the relative stand  
225 basal area, stand basal area increment, stem density and stool density as the ratio of these variables to  
226 their initial values (pre-thinning). We used a linear mixed model to test the evolution of stand  
227 characteristics as a function of years since treatment application, thinning, rainfall exclusion and their  
228 interactions with plot as a random factor to account for repeated measures.

### 229 **3. Results**

#### 230 *3.1 Stem growth and resistance to drought*

231 Mean stem growth over the 15-year period was strongly affected by thinning ( $P < 0.001$ , Figure 1A,  
232 explained variance of 12.2%) but not by rainfall exclusion ( $P = 0.77$ ). Stem growth was positively  
233 related to stem DBH in interaction with stem-level competition release, so that biggest stems responded  
234 more to competition release (Table 2; Figure 1B). Stem DBH explained 53% of stem growth variance,  
235 competition release an additional 7% and the interaction between these factors 0.5%. Absolute  
236 competition (BA<sub>n</sub>) had an additive negative effect and explained 1.9% of stem growth variance.

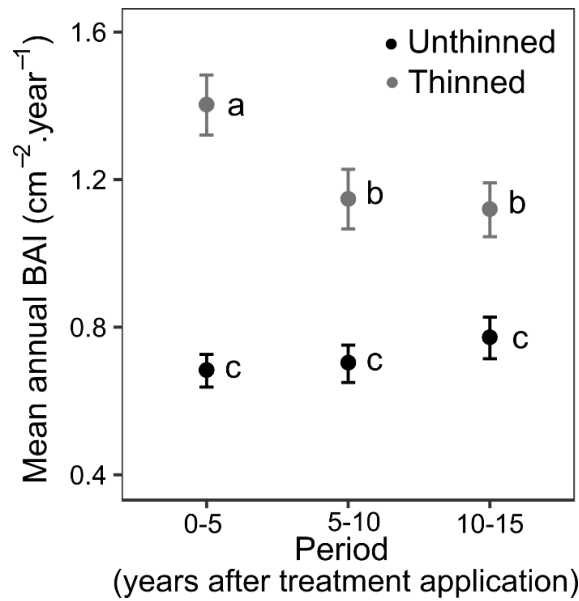


238

239 **Figure 1** : *Quercus ilex* stem mean annual basal area increment (BAI) as a function of : A) treatments  
 240 (means  $\pm$  standard error of 99 to 173 stems per treatment, different letters indicate differences  
 241 between treatments) and B) model projections and experimental data of stem BAI as a function  
 242 of stem DBH and competition release (CR), confidence intervals of the models are represented  
 243 in grey. CR=0 represent trees unthinned (represented by grey points), CR=0.25 is the median  
 244 (white points) and CR=0.4 the upper quartile (crosses) of CR values in the thinned treatments.  
 245 Point symbols are determined by the closest value of CR. Competition release is calculated as  
 246 the change of neighbors' basal area in a 3m radius compared to its initial value before treatment  
 247 application in 2003. Full model  $R^2$  is 62%, stem DBH explains 53% of the variance and CR 7%  
 248 (see Table 2).

249

250 Thinning effect on stem growth decreased over time (Thinning x Period interaction,  $P < 0.001$ ; Figure  
 251 2) but remained significant ( $P < 0.001$ , post-hoc Tukey tests) during all the periods. Rainfall exclusion  
 252 had no effect on stem growth in any of the periods (Rainfall exclusion main effect  $P = 0.43$ , interaction  
 253 with Period  $P = 0.32$ ).

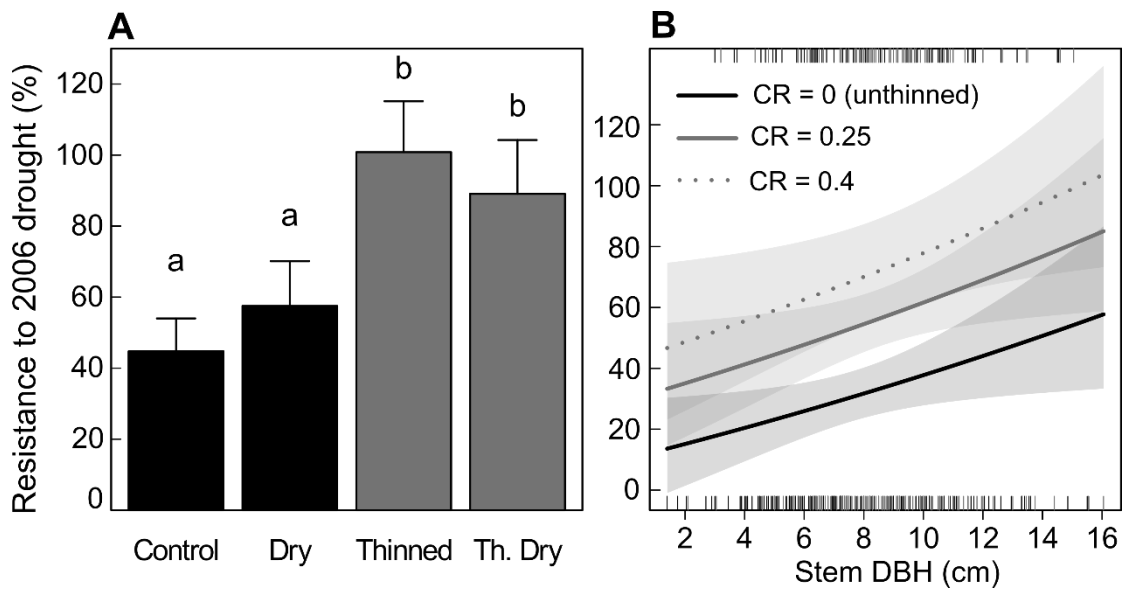


254

255 **Figure 2:** Temporal evolution of thinning effects on *Quercus ilex* stem growth (mean ± standard  
 256 error). Thinning effect decrease with time but is always significant ( $P < 0.001$ ). Different letters  
 257 indicate significant differences between treatments and periods (Tukey post-hoc tests).

258

259 The extreme spring drought in 2006 induced a strong reduction of stem growth to about 50% of the  
 260 average of the preceding years in the unthinned plots (Figure 3A). Thinning strongly increased stem  
 261 resistance to drought ( $P < 0.001$ ; Figure 3) as tree growth was maintained in thinned stands. In contrast,  
 262 stem growth resistance to drought was not affected by rainfall exclusion ( $P = 0.77$ ) nor by the interaction  
 263 between rainfall exclusion and thinning ( $P = 0.25$ ). Thinning explained 8.1% of the variance in stem  
 264 growth resistance to drought. Stem resistance to drought was positively related to stem DBH (explained  
 265 variance = 2.5%) and competition release (explained variance = 4.5%; Figure 3B; Table 2).



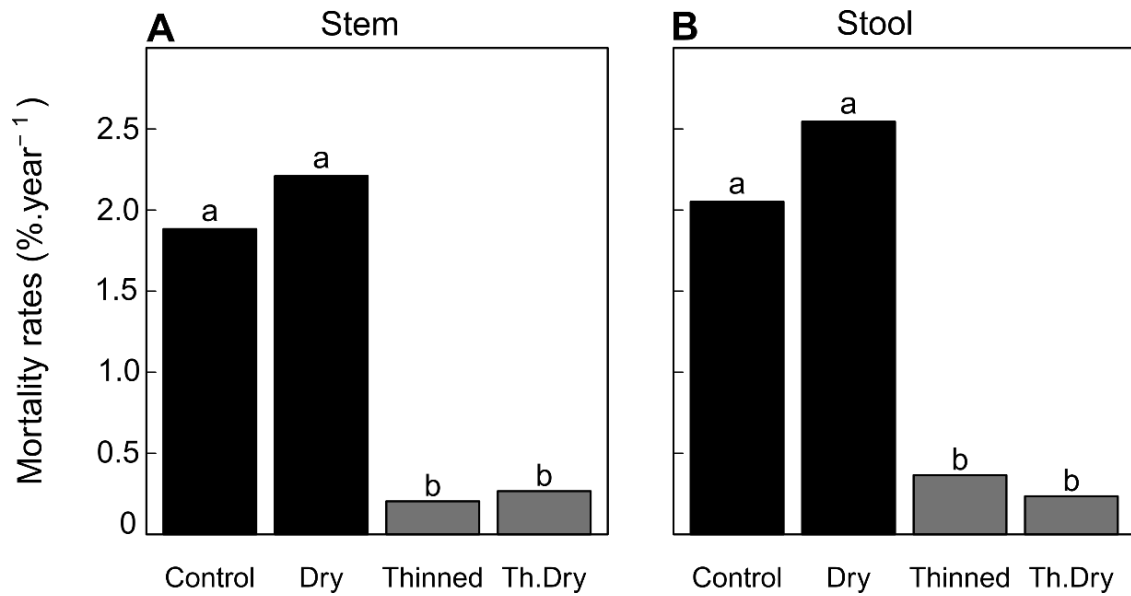
267

268 **Figure 3** : *Quercus ilex* stem growth resistance to the extreme 2006 drought as a function of A)  
 269 treatments (means  $\pm$  standard error of 85 to 123 trees per treatment) and B) model projections  
 270 of drought resistance as a function of stem DBH and competition release (CR) with confidence  
 271 intervals in grey and ticks representing data distribution. Full model  $R^2$  is 7%, stem DBH  
 272 explains 2.5% of the variance and CR 4.5% (see Table 2).

273

### 274 3.2 Stem and stool mortality

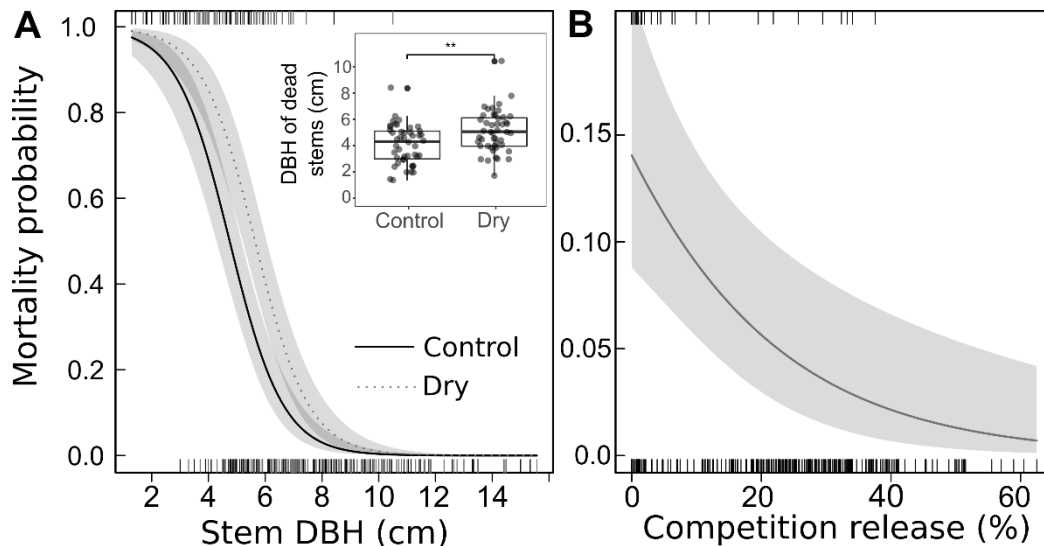
275 The average stem mortality rate was 2.2%.year<sup>-1</sup> in control stands and was not significantly increased  
 276 by rainfall exclusion ( $P = 0.14$ ). The mortality rate was, however, strongly decreased to only 0.2%.year<sup>-1</sup>  
 277 in thinned stands ( $P < 0.001$ , explained variance of 18%): only 3 and 4 stem deaths were recorded in  
 278 thinned and thinned dry stands, respectively. Similarly, at the stool-level, the mortality rate was  
 279 2.1%.year<sup>-1</sup> in the control stands and increased to 2.5%.year<sup>-1</sup> in the dry treatment, although this  
 280 difference was not significant ( $P = 0.22$ ). Thinning strongly reduced stool mortality ( $P < 0.001$ ) to  
 281 0.03%.year<sup>-1</sup>, regardless of the rainfall exclusion treatment (Figure 4B).



282  
 283 **Figure 4** : *Quercus ilex* stem (A) and stool (B) annual mortality rates as a function of treatment.  
 284 Different letters indicate differences between treatments ( $P < 0.05$ ).

285

286 Stem mortality probability was influenced by stem DBH, competition release and rainfall exclusion  
 287 (Table 2, Figure 5). Stem mortality risk was higher for smaller stems: all trees under 3 cm of DBH died  
 288 during the 15 years of the experiment while the mortality probability was almost null for DBH higher  
 289 than 10 cm. Stem DBH explained 40% of the variance of the mortality risk, rainfall exclusion 4% and  
 290 competition release 4%. Taking into account stem diameter, the mortality risk was higher in the dry  
 291 treatment ( $P=0.003$ , Table 2) and decreased with competition release. The mean diameter of dead stems  
 292 was higher in the rainfall exclusion treatment in unthinned plots ( $t = -3.16$ ,  $P = 0.002$ , Figure 5A). The  
 293 stool mortality risk was also higher for smaller stools, and rainfall exclusion shifted the mortality risk  
 294 toward bigger stools in the unthinned treatment (Rainfall exclusion x Stool BA,  $P = 0.01$ , Supp. Figure  
 295 S2).



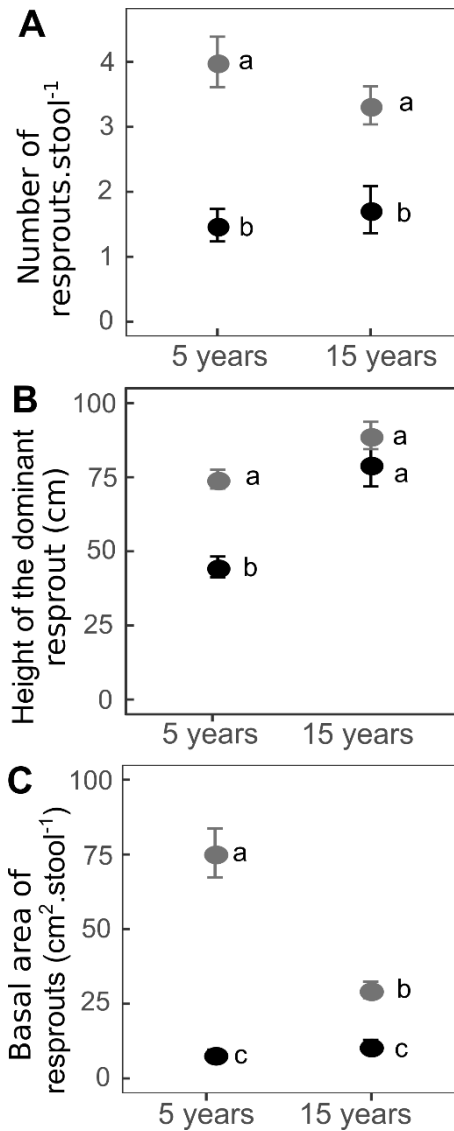
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297 **Figure 5** : *Quercus ilex* stem mortality probability as a function of A) stem DBH and rainfall  
 298 exclusion treatment - the inset shows dead stems DBH as a function of rainfall exclusion  
 299 treatment in unthinned stands, asterisks denote the significance of a t-test (\*\*,  $P < 0.01$ ) - and  
 300 B) competition release, for a median DBH value (7.3 cm). Grey areas represent the confidence  
 301 intervals of the models. Ticks represent dead (top) and alive (bottom) trees according to their  
 302 DBH and rainfall exclusion treatment (black = Control, grey = Dry). Full model  $R^2 = 48\%$   
 303 (variance explained by stem DBH 40%, Rainfall exclusion 4% and Competition release 4%).

304

### 305 3.3 Resprouting dynamics

306 None of the resprouts characteristics was influenced by rainfall exclusion (Table S1). Resprouts number  
 307 was higher in thinned plots at the two inventory dates (Table S1, Figure 6A). Resprouts maximal height  
 308 was higher in thinned plots after 5 years but did not differ among treatments after 15 years (Table S1,  
 309 Fig 6B). The established resprouts (height > 1.30m) after 15 years represented 22% of the resprouts in  
 310 thinned plots and 13% in unthinned plots. Resprouts basal area was higher in thinned plots in both  
 311 inventory dates, but it strongly decreased between the two inventory dates in thinned stands resulting in  
 312 a lower difference between treatments after 15 years (Table S1, Figure 6C). Resprouts basal area  
 313 increased with stool size ( $P < 0.001$ ) and with the proportion of stool basal area cut ( $P < 0.001$ ), with a  
 314 positive interaction between these two factors ( $P < 0.001$ ) so that stool size influenced less the  
 315 resprouting when it had not been thinned (data not shown).



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**Figure 6:** *Quercus ilex* resprouts number per stool (A), height of the dominant resprout (B) and total basal area of the resprouts (C) as a function of thinning treatment (black: unthinned, grey: thinned) and period. Data are means  $\pm$  standard error of 246 to 284 stools per thinning treatment (pooled over the rainfall exclusion treatment which had no effect). Different letters indicate differences between treatments and inventory date ( $P < 0.005$ , Tukey post-hoc tests)

### 3.4 Evolution of the stand basal area and density

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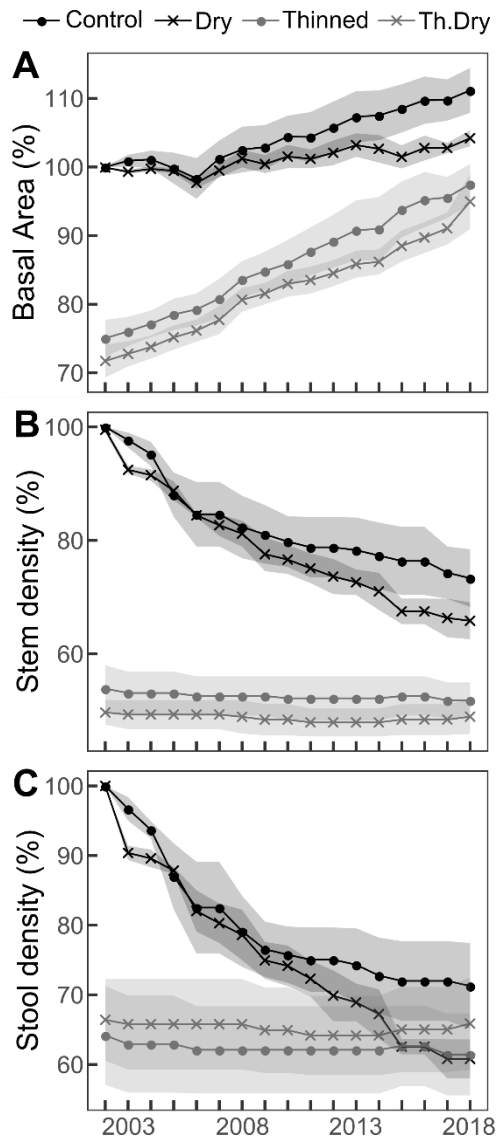
Stand basal area increment was  $0.16 \pm 0.05 \text{ m}^2 \cdot \text{ha}^{-1} \cdot \text{year}^{-1}$  in the control plots and decreased to  $0.06 \pm 0.07 \text{ m}^2 \cdot \text{ha}^{-1} \cdot \text{year}^{-1}$  in the dry plots, although the difference was not significant ( $P = 0.3$ ). Stand basal area increment was more than doubled in thinned stands, up to  $0.41 \pm 0.06 \text{ m}^2 \cdot \text{ha}^{-1} \cdot \text{year}^{-1}$  (difference from the control :  $P < 0.001$ ), with no significant decrease under drier conditions ( $0.39 \pm 0.06 \text{ m}^2 \cdot \text{ha}^{-1} \cdot \text{year}^{-1}$ , Table 3). Since the start of the experiment, a net annual loss of basal area (when mortality

329 exceeds the growth of the remaining stems) occurred in 3 years in the control plots and in 7 years in the  
330 dry plots but never occurred in thinned plots.

331 The relative basal area (as the percentage of plot initial basal area) was strongly influenced by the  
332 interaction between time, rainfall exclusion and thinning ( $P = 0.001$ , Table 3). In the unthinned  
333 treatments, rainfall exclusion led to a slower progression of stand basal area (0.3 vs 0.8%.year<sup>-1</sup>; Figure  
334 7A). After the initial reduction of basal area due to thinning, the increase in basal area was much faster  
335 in thinned stand, reaching 1.4%.year<sup>-1</sup> with no difference between the thinned and thinned dry plots. The  
336 differences between thinned and unthinned plots thus progressively decreased over time: after 15 years  
337 thinned stands had recovered about 95% of their initial basal area.

338 Stem and stool relative density were both influenced by the 3-way interaction between time, thinning  
339 and rainfall exclusion (Table 3). Stem and stool densities decreased faster in the dry (slopes of -1.8 and  
340 -2.1 %.year<sup>-1</sup>, respectively) than in the control treatment (slopes of -1.3 and -1.5%.year<sup>-1</sup>). In the thinned  
341 treatments, after an initial reduction of stem and stool densities by about 50% and 36% due to thinning,  
342 they remained stable in time (slope not different from 0) in both thinned and thinned dry plots. At the  
343 end of the experiment, stem density was still higher in the unthinned plots (Figure 7B), but from 2010  
344 (after 7 years of treatment) stool density was not significantly different between thinned and unthinned  
345 plots (Figure 7C).





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347 **Figure 7:** Evolution of *Quercus ilex* relative stand basal area (A), stem density (B) and stool density  
 348 (C) as a percentage of pre-thinning values in the different treatments. Data are means  $\pm$  standard  
 349 error of 3 plots per treatment.

## 350 4. Discussion

### 351 4.1 Thinning and rainfall exclusion effects from the stem to the stand

352 Thinning strongly stimulated stem growth and increased the resistance to an extreme drought event,  
 353 thereby confirming the interest of this management practice to alleviate drought effects on stem growth  
 354 (Cabon et al., 2018b; Navarro-Cerrillo et al., 2019; Sohn et al., 2016b). Partial rainfall exclusion, in  
 355 contrast, had no effect on individual stem growth, probably because growth occurs mainly during spring  
 356 rainy periods when the difference in tree water stress between rainfall exclusion treatments is low  
 357 (Gavinet et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Calcerrada et al., 2011), and also because of a change in tree allocation  
 358 in favor of wood compared to leaves and fruits (Gavinet et al., 2019). The rainfall exclusion effect

359 appeared, however, as a shift of the size – mortality risk relationship toward the bigger individuals,  
360 which led to more frequent losses of basal area and consequently a slower basal area increment at the  
361 stand-level. In thinned stands, mortality was almost completely cancelled which, combined with the  
362 faster growth, resulted in a stand basal area increment more than doubled compared to the control,  
363 similarly to what was observed by Ogaya et al. (2019) in another *Q. ilex* stand. In our experiment,  
364 thinning proved to have larger effects on stem growth and mortality than rainfall exclusion, in line with  
365 recent studies at larger scales showing that competition is more important than climate in determining  
366 forest demography (Fernández-de-Uña et al., 2015; Ruiz-Benito et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2015).

367 The loss of stools from mortality appeared to happen faster than the loss of stems in the unthinned plots,  
368 and this tendency was reinforced by the rainfall exclusion. The consequence of this phenomenon is a  
369 progressive loss of unique genotypes within the coppice stand and an increasing level of clonality (ratio  
370 of stems over stools), especially under more stressful dry conditions. This result suggests that multi-  
371 stemmed stools survive better to the increased competition for water under rainfall exclusion (Fig. S2),  
372 either because they grow in more favourable micro-habitats or because these individuals are better  
373 genetically adapted to drought. Thinning, on the other hand, reduced the initial stool density in the plots  
374 by 36%, but our experiment revealed that thinning maintained population sizes and did not induce  
375 further loss of unique genotypes in the long-term. Interestingly, all treatments converged toward a  
376 similar stool density by the end of our 15-year study. Drastic reductions in the number of unique  
377 genotypes (by thinning and/or mortality) can lead to the loss of rare alleles (Danusevicius et al., 2016).  
378 However, previous studies have shown that moderate thinning intensities have rather limited  
379 consequences on genetic diversity in the long-term (Danusevicius et al., 2016; Koskela et al., 2013;  
380 Valbuena-Carabaña et al., 2008). On the contrary, thinning has been shown to increase acorn production  
381 in our experimental site (Gavinet et al., 2019), so it may result in positive effects on sexual regeneration  
382 and seedling diversity (Lefevre et al., 2014).

#### 383 *4.2 Stem performances and thinning effects are linked to stem size and competition release*

384 Stem size had a strong positive effect on stem growth, probability of survival and, to a lesser extent,  
385 growth resistance to drought. The strong decrease in mortality risk with tree size has been often  
386 evidenced in Mediterranean forests (Colangelo et al., 2017; Hülsmann et al., 2017; Ruiz-Benito et al.,  
387 2013) but contrasts with results from more humid forests (Bennett et al., 2015). This positive effect of  
388 stem size on all stem performances may be linked to a better access of big trees to deep water (Kerhoulas  
389 et al., 2013) and suggests that this holm oak stand, even 70 years after the last clear-cut, is still in a self-  
390 thinning dynamic where suppressed stems are more likely to die while dominant trees are still vigorous.  
391 By selecting the biggest, most vigorous stems, thinning from below directly improved the mean stem  
392 growth, survival and resistance to drought. Thinning thus anticipated the self-thinning: we can estimate  
393 that about 60% of the stems and all the stools that have been cut would have died during the following  
394 15 years (see Table 1; Figure 6b; Appendix. S2). This size-selection effect accounted for about half of

395 the thinning effect on stem growth. Conversely, the fact that rainfall exclusion limited the positive  
396 influence of stem or stool size on the mortality risk could indicate a deeper depletion of water resources  
397 in the dry treatment.

398 Thinning effects on stem growth were stronger for bigger stems, which were more able to respond to  
399 competition release. A similar disproportionate effect of thinning on the bigger stems has previously  
400 been found for *Q. ilex* (Cabon et al., 2018b; Mayor and Rodà, 1993), and for *Q. faginea* (Cañellas et al.,  
401 2004), while on boreal species Bose et al. (2018) found that tree size had no influence on the thinning  
402 response and (Jones et al., 2009) that small trees responded more. In our experiment, thinning was made  
403 from below by removing only the smallest stems so the increase in light availability was very limited  
404 for the bigger, dominant trees. Competition release, that explained roughly half of the thinning effects  
405 on stem growth and resistance to drought, is thus probably related to a release of competition for water.  
406 Competition for water is indeed more symmetric than competition for light (Schwinning and Weiner,  
407 1998), so that the suppression of small trees or even of understory shrubs can increase water availability  
408 for big trees (Giuggiola et al., 2018). The stronger effect of competition release on bigger trees suggests  
409 that they had a greater capacity to expand their root system to take up this additional water. Kerhoulas  
410 et al. (2013) observed that bigger trees, but also trees growing in thinned stands, rely on deeper water  
411 sources than small trees or trees in denser stands, suggesting that thinning indeed foster root expansion.  
412 In addition, the higher relative importance of competition release compared to stem size for resistance  
413 to an extreme drought event also points to the improvement of water availability as the main mechanism  
414 for thinning effects during an extreme drought. This improvement of water availability may arise both  
415 from a deeper rooting and from a decrease in stand-level transpiration (Gavinet et al., 2019), delaying  
416 the depletion of water resources in thinned stands (Cabon et al., 2018b).

417 Remarkably, absolute values of local competition index had less influence on stem growth than  
418 competition release. Given that the stand history is homogeneous, the low explanatory power of  
419 neighbor basal area may reflect the fine-scale spatial heterogeneity of the soil rock fraction and water  
420 holding capacity. Indeed, in this very rocky soil, a low value of neighbor basal area probably reflects  
421 bad local conditions because the vegetation is expected to be in equilibrium with the local soil carrying  
422 capacity (Cabon et al., 2018a; Eagleson, 1982). Absolute values of neighbor basal area after thinning  
423 are thus a poor predictor of competition intensity, as these values already differed before thinning due  
424 to soil heterogeneity. Interestingly, this may suggest that the same percentage of basal area removal  
425 could be applied successfully across variable local soil conditions, although this remain to be assessed  
426 in a more variable context.

#### 427 *4.3 Temporal evolution of treatment effects*

428 Thinning effect on tree growth decreased with time as expected, but it remained positive 15 years after  
429 thinning even though the stand almost recovered its initial basal area. This long lasting thinning effect

430 contrasts with studies in temperate forests where thinning effect can vanish in a few years (e.g. Bréda et  
431 al., 1995). Slow growing species such as *Q. ilex* take longer to recover to their pre-thinning basal and  
432 leaf area. In line with this idea, Bose et al. (2018) also observed that thinning effects lasted longer for  
433 shade-tolerant species. In Mediterranean forests, thinning effects were observed to be maintained to a  
434 similar level after 8 years in a *Q. faginea* stand (Cañellas et al., 2004) and to remain significant after 12  
435 years in a *Q. ilex* stand (Mayor and Rodà, 1993) and after 20 years in *Pinus halepensis* stands (Manrique-  
436 Alba et al. 2020). In contrast, in a mixed stand including *Q. ilex* and *Q. faginea*, Cotillas et al. (2009)  
437 found that growth stimulation after thinning vanished after only 2 years and attributed this to a fast and  
438 intense resprouting in their low-density stand. Here, resprouting was rather intense in the first years after  
439 thinning (Figure 5; Rodríguez-Calcerrada et al., 2011), particularly for big stools that had been  
440 intensively cut as resprouting is known to be stimulated by previous stool size and thinning intensity  
441 (e.g. Adamec et al., 2017). We then observed a decrease over time in resprouts number and summed  
442 basal area in the thinned plots, meaning that resprout mortality was not compensated by resprout growth  
443 probably because the thinning from below did not increase sufficiently light availability in the  
444 understory. This contrasts with results by Retana et al. (1992) who observed that the decreasing number  
445 of resprouts was compensated by their increasing size, so that the total biomass of resprouts remained  
446 constant over time. Besides, no vegetative recruits were produced in the 15-year period following  
447 thinning in our study. This confirms that our low-intensity thinning from below was effective at  
448 controlling the resprouting dynamic in thinned stands, which probably participates in explaining the  
449 long-lasting effects of thinning in our site.

450 As a consequence of this absence of recruitment and of the self-thinning mortality in unthinned stands,  
451 stool densities are now similar in thinned and unthinned stands, and stand basal area is expected to  
452 become similar in the coming years. In the future, both stands will thus converge to similar structures,  
453 but generated either by management or by natural mortality. If drought sensitivity is partly genetically  
454 determined, then natural mortality may select for the best adapted trees. On the contrary, thinning may  
455 relax this selection and lead to maladaptive responses on the long-term, questioning the relevance of  
456 such management for forest adaptation to climate change (Lefevre et al. 2014). Once competition release  
457 has been offset by the growth of neighbors, frequent thinning may be needed to maintain positive effects  
458 on drought responses (Sohn et al., 2016a). Here, the positive thinning effect on growth resistance to  
459 drought has been highlighted only 3 years after thinning application and remains to be confirmed for  
460 further extreme drought events. In our experiment, thinning removed the small trees that proved to be  
461 more sensitive to drought in terms of growth and mortality, and has probably fostered root expansion,  
462 which may also induce long-term positive effects on drought resistance. Whether this will be enough to  
463 sustain an improved resistance to drought on the long-term, or whether natural mortality does a better  
464 job in selecting for drought resistance, remain to be assessed in the future decades.

## 465 **5 Conclusion and implications for management**

466 This ageing oak coppice was still in a self-thinning phase 70 years after the last clear-cut, with a  
467 progressively decreasing number of individuals and a low stem and stand-level growth. Long-term  
468 increased drought by experimental rainfall exclusion led to the death of bigger trees than in the control  
469 treatment, which slowed the stand basal area increment. Thinning from below can cancel the drought  
470 effects by stimulating stem growth and avoiding mortality, even under chronic or extreme drought. The  
471 basal area increment at the stand level was twice faster in the thinned stand, while the loss of unique  
472 genotypes was not larger in the long-term than the one induced by natural mortality. Size-selection of  
473 the most vigorous stems and competition release for belowground resources both participate to explain  
474 thinning effects. Positive thinning effects diminished over time but remain significant after 15 years. By  
475 applying a moderate thinning intensity (-30%), keeping the dominant tree layer and keeping at least one  
476 stem on multi-stemmed stool, resprouting dynamic was rather limited, which may have participated to  
477 the long-lasting thinning effects and is important for fire prevention. A test of this thinning regime in  
478 other stands with differing climatic and edaphic conditions is required to confirm its benefits under a  
479 wide range of situations. Thinning has also been shown to improve stand-level above-ground  
480 productivity and fruit production while reducing water consumption (Gavinet et al., 2019), thus  
481 confirming that it can be an efficient way to improve stand and tree vitality and to adapt the  
482 Mediterranean coppices to climate change. Thinning oak coppices will also result in forests with bigger  
483 trees, which may be used for other products than traditional fuel wood.

484

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496 **Table 1** : Stem, stool and stand characteristics before and after thinning. Means and range (within brackets) of the different metrics are shown. BA = Basal Area.  
 497 Neighbors basal area is calculated within a 3m-radius circle around each stem.

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	<b>DBH</b> (cm)	<b>Neighbors BA</b> (cm <sup>2</sup> /m <sup>2</sup> )	<b>Stool BA</b> (cm <sup>2</sup> )	<b>Plot BA</b> (m <sup>2</sup> /ha)	<b>Stem density</b> (nb/ha)	<b>Stool density</b> (nb/ha)
<b>Control</b>	6.6 [1.3 - 15.3]	25.9 [6.1 - 53.6]	69.9 [1.6 - 531.4]	24.2 [23.4 - 25.1]	5767 [4000 - 6900]	3470 [1700 - 4500]
<b>Dry</b>	7.2 [1.7 - 15.6]	26.8 [9.6 - 57.0]	76.2 [4.1 - 701.7]	27.6 [22.4 - 31.0]	6133 [5100 - 7000]	3630 [3300 - 4200]
<b>Thinned</b>	7.2 [1.0 - 15.7]	26.3 [4.5 - 46.5]	70.6 [0.7 - 706.2]	27.9 [19.6 - 32.6]	5867 [4000 - 8000]	4030 [2600 - 5900]
<b>Thinned Dry</b>	6.6 [1.2 - 13.5]	26.3 [6.2 - 41.3]	70.5 [1.1 - 453.7]	29.7 [22.5 - 36.4]	6933 [6000 - 8100]	4230 [3500 - 5000]
<i>After thinning</i>						
<b>Thinned</b>	9.0 [4.0 - 15.7]	20.1 [3 - 34.6]	86.8 [12.9 - 486.0]	20.8 [15.9 - 23.5]	3133 [2400 - 3900]	2470 [1700 - 3200]
<b>Thinned Dry</b>	8.3 [2.2 - 13.5]	19.0 [4.3 - 31.7]	77.4 [7.1 - 393.3]	21.9 [16.9 - 25.1]	3433 [3200 - 3600]	2830 [2600 - 3100]
<i>After 15 years</i>						
<b>Control</b>	8.5 [3.4 - 16.4]	32.0 [6.3 - 64.5]	112 [11.3 - 622]	27 [26.2 - 28.2]	4167 [3400 - 4900]	2400 [1500 - 2900]
<b>Dry</b>	9.2 [3.7 - 17.1]	30.7 [9.1 - 51.0]	128 [13.9 - 802]	28.9 [23.6 - 31.7]	4133 [3000 - 4900]	2230 [1900 - 2600]
<b>Thinned</b>	10.5 [4.8 - 18.9]	28.4 [3.7 - 47.2]	117 [18.1 - 654]	26.6 [21.1 - 29.7]	3033 [2300 - 3600]	2267 [1600 - 2800]
<b>Thinned Dry</b>	9.7 [3.6 - 15.2]	25.9 [7.3 - 45.1]	102 [24.4 - 541]	27.9 [22.7 - 32.2]	3300 [3100 - 3400]	2733 [2500 - 3000]

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502 **Table 2:** Parameters of the best individual model for stem growth, growth resistance to drought and  
 503 mortality risk. See model predictions on Figure 1B, 3B and 5.

**Stem growth -  $\log(\text{BAI}+1)$ ,  $\text{cm}^2 \cdot \text{year}^{-1}$**

	Estimate	Standard error	<i>P</i> - value
Intercept	-0.21	0.05	<0.001
DBH	0.10	0.005	<0.001
Competition Release (CR)	-0.38	0.25	0.14
DBH:CR	0.08	0.03	0.01
Basal Area of the neighbors (BAn)	-0.004	0.002	0.02
<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.62		

**Stem resistance to drought –  $\log(\text{BAI}_{2006}/\text{mean}(\text{BAI}_{2003}, \text{BAI}_{2004}, \text{BAI}_{2005}) + 1)$**

Intercept	0.09	0.08	0.2
DBH	0.02	0.01	0.02
Competition Release (CR)	0.64	0.15	<0.001
<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.07		

**Mortality probability – log odds (mortality)**

Intercept	4.9	0.6	<0.001
DBH	-1.04	0.11	<0.001
Competition Release (CR)	-4.87	1.55	0.1
Rainfall exclusion	0.8	0.3	0.003
<i>Pseudo-r</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.48		

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505 **Table 3:** Results of the linear mixed model analysis for stand-level evolution of basal area increment, relative basal area, relative stem density, and relative  
 506 stool density (as a fraction of initial situation at the start of the experiment in 2003) according to time and treatments. Significant P-values are highlighted  
 507 in bold.

	DF	Basal Area Increment		Relative Basal Area		Relative Stem Density		Relative Stool Density	
		F	<i>P</i> - value	F	<i>P</i> - value	F	<i>P</i> - value	F	<i>P</i> - value
Rainfall Exclusion (E)	1	1.3	0.28	2.43	0.16	1.5	0.25	<b>0.03</b>	0.86
Thinning (Th)	1	31.1	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	58.8	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	72.8	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	6.3	<b>0.03</b>
Time (Ti)	15	0.9	0.35	1415.3	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	528.9	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	426.3	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
E × Th	1	0.6	0.44	0.01	0.94	0.01	0.92	0.6	0.47
E × Ti	15	0.1	0.76	31.1	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	11.49	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	11.3	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
Th × Ti	15	0.6	0.43	263.1	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	440.7	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	370.5	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
E × Th × Ti	15	0.1	0.92	12.125	<b>0.001</b>	11.14	<b>0.001</b>	10.7	<b>0.001</b>

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728

729 **Supplementary material**

730

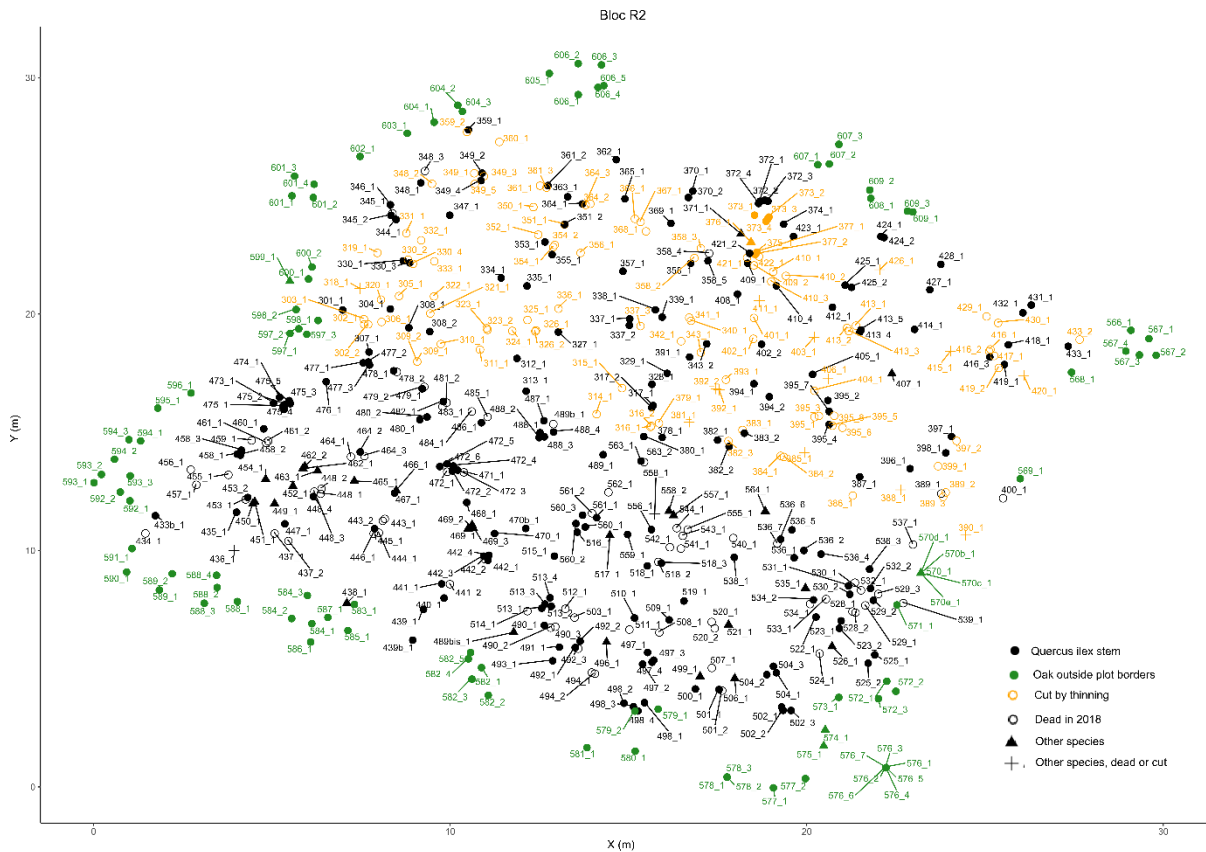
731 **Table S1** : Resprouts characteristics according to treatments and inventory date : ANOVA Table. Significant *P*-values are highlighted in bold.

732

	D.F.	Number of resprouts per stool		Height of the dominant resprout		Basal Area of resprouts per stool	
		LR $\chi^2$	P	LR $\chi^2$	P	LR $\chi^2$	LR $\chi^2$
Rainfall exclusion (E)	1	1.8	0.17	0.1	0.7	1.4	0.23
Thinning (T)	1	50.1	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	23.1	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	84.4	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
Inventory date (D)	1	1.4	0.24	19.2	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	1.5	0.22
E × T	1	1.2	0.28	0.7	0.38	0.4	0.51
E × D	1	0.8	0.37	0.5	0.48	0.6	0.44
T × D	1	0.9	0.33	9.4	<b>0.002</b>	4	<b>0.04</b>
E × T × D	1	0.01	0.95	2.3	0.12	0.03	0.86

733

734 **Figure S1** : Map of one experimental block showing the spatial aggregation patterns of stems and  
 735 stools. Each stem is a point (or a triangle for secondary species) and the first number represents  
 736 the stool number followed by the stem number within the stool (#stool\_#stem). Stems cut by  
 737 thinning and dead stems in 2018 are also indicated



738  
 739 **Figure S2** : *Quercus ilex* stool mortality probability as a function of stool basal area and rainfall  
 740 exclusion treatment. Grey areas indicate confidence intervals of the model.



