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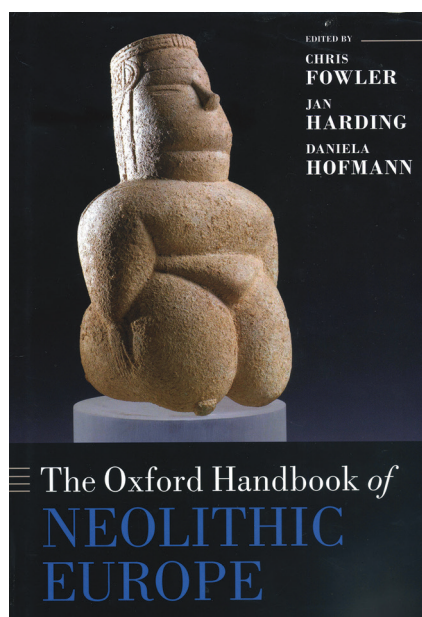
NATURAL SCIENCES IN ARCHAEOLOGY

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Book reviews

The Oxford Handbook of Neolithic Europe.
Chris Fowler, Jan Harding and Daniela Hofmann (Eds.)
Oxford University Press (2015), Oxford,
UK, 1166 pp., ISBN 978-0-19954584-1



1. Introduction

The topic of this huge volume, with as many as a thousand pages, is Neolithic Europe – as seen through the eyes of archaeology and some closely-related disciplines. As the book's preface informs us, it comprises the work of over seventy authors from more than forty-five institutions in fifteen separate countries. The handbook is divided into four parts. The first part (Part I) is an introduction written by the book's editors Chris Fowler, Jan Harding and Daniela Hofmann, explaining the purpose and goals of the book, describing the topics of particular chapters and thematic sections and offering some basic explanation. With such a huge number of chapters, it is difficult and perhaps inappropriate to comment on every text in this review. We have decided to concentrate our attention on three areas of interest. These are the

processes of Neolitization, especially in the Balkans and Central Europe, followed by the chapters dealing with the phenomenon of households and burials, and, finally, the chapters connected methodologically with the scientific methods used in archaeology, including economy, subsistence and bioarchaeology.

2. Mobility, Change, and Interaction at a Large Scale

The second conceptual part (Part II) of the handbook starts with Tony Brown, Geoff Bailey and Dave Passmore's chapter called *Environments and Landscape Change*. It describes the fundamental natural constraints that had shaped the European landscape in the period contemporary with the process of Neolitization and the Neolithic period. Despite some scarcity and lack of information about the development of vegetation cover, the authors offer a detailed picture of climate trends including deterioration events, which affected societies several times in the Neolithic period. The chapter is actually a very good outline of the natural and anthropogenic processes that framed transitional Neolithic/Mesolithic economies and early agricultural societies in Europe. The description is not only environmental, but partially and also surprisingly theoretical in the way of environmental and landscape archaeology approaches that encompass such phenomena as symbolic spaces, high altitude environments and the potential skylines seen by humans in forested and open landscapes.

Part II then continues with a thematic section called "Movement of Plants, Animals, Ideas, and People". It includes five chapters that describe the general trends of movements in Neolithic Europe. Johannes Müller in his chapter *Movement of Plants, Animals, Ideas, and People in South-East Europe* describes the Neolithic and Chalcolithic period in the Balkans and Carpathian basin. He follows the social and economic changes during Neolitization and

the introduction of copper metallurgy that came along later. The first part discusses the possibilities and ways of Neolitization in southeast Europe. It tracks the areas through the evidence of the first Neolithic elements, differences between Mesolithic foragers and Neolithic farmers, and seeks to find confirmation of the interactions within these two social systems and populations.

This issue is followed by Jean Guilaine in his chapter *The Neolitization of Mediterranean Europe. Mobility and Interactions from the Near East to the Iberian Peninsula*. In successive steps he describes the expansion of the Neolithic lifestyle: first of all in the Near East continued by the spread of the Neolithic mode of life in the Mediterranean basin. Making three points, Guilaine suggests various hypotheses about the reasons for the abandonment of the Levantine region. He discusses the issues of demographic growth, social stress and the environmental aspect. By the heterogeneity of pottery styles, and some other indexes such as settlement organization and hierarchy, kinds of burials, decoration, and frequency of figurines and ritual artefacts, this chapter highlights the differences between the Near East and Western Mediterranean (Cardial style). Guilaine explains that "*Neolitization was not a single diffusion ...*" and points to the "*periodic breaks in its spread and the cultural transformation of the original model*".

Wolfram Schier in the chapter on *Central and Eastern Europe* rather traditionally describes (once again) the basic question of Neolitization in Central Europe: was it demic diffusion or a spread of ideas? Or even something more complicated? Probably yes, as witnessed today by 'molecular archaeology'. Schier comments on the different arguments of continuity and discontinuity in the archaeological record. Current data tend to support that of the Neolithic economy spreading by demic diffusion around 5600 BC and thus against 'transmission of ideas'; however, Schier suggests one way to integrate both models as do the majority of chapter authors in this

section. Anne Tresset in the chapter *Moving animals and plants in the Early Neolithic Europe focuses on Atlantic Europe*, which was rather on the periphery of the Neolithic world. Comparing similar and parallel stories described in this section of the handbook, she comments on some interesting phenomena such as the “Mesolithic” cattle find from Ireland depicting bovids in ceramics that belong to the period of the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition. As an archaeozoologist, she freshly records other interesting phenomena such as the origin of feral, originally domesticated, animals in some parts of Europe.

Stephen Shennan in his chapter *Language, Genes, and Cultural Interaction* discusses the history of debate over farming populations introduced through a process of indigenous adoption or the expansion of farming people. His text is a rare exception in this handbook because, rather modestly, he comments on the genetic knowledge, which seems today to be one of the crucial sources of information about the biological identity of prehistoric populations and individuals. Unfortunately, his research trail ends somewhere around 2010 and is rather insufficient (we suppose the editorial work on the volume proved to be long), because recent developments in genetics have been rapid and dynamic. However, Shennan correctly outlines the facts when he summarizes the key story that the Mesolithic and Neolithic European populations were different in terms of their genetic-biological origins and identity. The most valuable part of his chapter from our perspective is his analysis of the origins of Indo-European languages. He mentions the complex mathematical reconstruction of the Indo-European language dispersal chronology and his statement that there is “increasing evidence that Renfrew’s (Colin Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language*, London 1987 – note of reviewers) early date for Indo-Europeans is correct” could connect most modern European nations directly with the Neolithic people.

The second thematic section of part II offers four chapters focused on “Sequences of Cultural Interaction and Cultural Change”. John Chapman’s chapter *The Balkan Neolithic and Chalcolithic* describes the Danubian plain and mountainous regions between 7000–4000 BC. The core of his endeavour tracks the development of social structures in Neolithic society. Whereas in the “early farmers” stage domesticated plants and animals of a most basic level are recorded, the later “climax period” is characterized by the

deeper stratification of society, incoming of secondary agricultural products, and new technologies. He demonstrates changes in personhood by the specific treatment of clay figurines to scale, from gender-neutral figurines through to single-gender females/males and androgynous figurines. In this manner Chapman traces the inside world of the Neolithic society in the Balkans.

Caroline Malone’s chapter *The Neolithic in Mediterranean Europe* asks why and how hunter-gatherers in the environmentally optimal conditions of the Mediterranean region transformed themselves into farmers. She follows the differences between the eastern and western Mediterranean in order to explain the role of material exchanges within Mesolithic and Neolithic groups. Whereas the development of the eastern Mediterranean is characterized by the complex structure of the nascent Neolithic society, the western parts of the region was characterized by material exchange between indigenous people and Neolithic people. It is especially visible in the case of their engagement with pottery which “moved as gift and food containers”. In such conditions the process of Neolitization slowly transformed the region from a system of foraging to one of agriculture.

Relation between the Mesolithic tradition and the Neolithic society is also in focus with Detlef Gronenborn and Pavel Doluchanov’s chapter *Early Neolithic Manifestation in Central and Eastern Europe*. Both authors know this region in detail and therefore the presented chapter is a very challenging one. They discuss the relationship between hunter-gatherers and early farmers in the seventh millennium BC when contacts in material culture existed, and then the role of La Hoguette ceramic style and the possible character of its bearers. For the later LBK period there is expanding evidence of parallel Mesolithic and Neolithic populations in Central Europe and a different mixed economy in the “Neolithic” of Eastern Europe. They happily distinguish between the Neolithic and Eneolithic, the latter system being very different from the first one. Gronenborn and Doluchanov do a good job, despite being more reflective of some British scholars (but not just them only), still rigidly using the term “Neolithic” for all stages of the post-Mesolithic prehistory before the Bronze Age.

Nick Thorpe ends Part II of the handbook with the chapter *The Atlantic Mesolithic-Neolithic Transition*. He concentrates his attention on an area that saw a greater degree of continuity between both hunter-gatherers and early agricultural populations than did

Central and Southern Europe. This process is related to the TRB (Trichterbecherkultur, Funnel Beaker) phenomenon as being the first agricultural phase in many Atlantic regions. He systematically explains what happened outside of the northern frontier of the LBK in the different regions of Atlantic Europe. In this part of Europe it is more than obvious that hunter-gatherers were the main agents (but not exclusively) of the transformation of society into agriculturalists.

Part II can be regarded as conceptual, and we therefore comment on it as a complete set of chapters. A closer look at its content sparks the general statement of the reviewers that the set of chapters is sometimes thematically overlapping, especially when solving the principal question of Neolithic dispersal in Europe. Every chapter focuses on different European regions, so such an approach seems to concord with the principle of encyclopaedism. However, one might expect in part II some general paper explaining the Neolithic itself. Though it is missing here, we do not know if this was a deliberate strategy of the editors or not.

3. Neolithic Worlds and Neolithic Lifeways

The following huge set of chapters (Part III) focuses on the Neolithic worlds and Neolithic lifeways. As mentioned before, we are not attempting to review all chapters. As noted, our interest is thematically specific, unifying the highways of the Neolithic dispersal with the topic of housing and bioarchaeological studies. This part of the book, the largest, is comprised of some crucial themes of current archaeology, such as settlements, households, subsistence, materiality, art, cosmology and personality. It is subdivided into four sections. The first section, called “Houses, Habitation, and Community”, has seven chapters. We would like to mention the chapter by Pál Raczky *Settlements in South-East Europe*, which nicely presents a useful and substantial outline concerning tells and horizontal settlements, including how they are reflected in different European languages. Raczky regards tells as a material manifestation of the community throughout the entire Neolithic development. One part of this chapter is devoted to the specific relations between tells and horizontal settlements that lay in the surrounding area. In the case of this dualistic relationship he refers to Ian Hodder’s definitions of the concepts “domus” and “agrios”. This work offers a well-arranged but rather external overview of tell’s functions.

Domestic space in the Mediterranean is the name of a chapter written by Demetera Papaconstantinou. After a brief introduction to Neolitization, we come to an overview of the patterns of domestic areas and their use across the Mediterranean. Papaconstantinou begins with well-known settlements in Greece, followed by those in Italy and the Iberian Peninsula, returning her attention to Anatolia, the Levant and Cyprus. She systematically describes dating, followed by houses and their construction, and addresses the question of which materials have been used and if there is evidence of human activity inside. The text offers a very useful and clear source of information concerning the domestic space in this subject area.

Jonathan Last in his chapter *Longhouse Lifestyles in the Central European Neolithic* focuses on the longhouse phenomenon of the LBK communities, systematically describing the genesis of longhouses, their meaning, life cycles, durability and architecture. He discusses many important themes connected with the longhouse as a possible social structure for its inhabitants. Attention is paid to different forms of longhouse clustering, which reflect the social organisation of the LBK societies. Anick Coudart in her chapter *The Bandkeramik Longhouses* offers almost the same topic, but seen from a different, more formal, perspective. She offers a value systematics of longhouses: their different functional sections. She understands longhouses as expressions of the egalitarian character of LBK society. This aspect is broadly discussed in the second part of the chapter. For example, the longhouse is regarded as an expression of LBK society norms and an important instrument of community reproduction.

The second section called “Subsistence and Social Routine” is notably interesting for us as well as for the IANSa Journal. The chapter *Stable Isotopes and Neolithic Subsistence: Pattern and Variation* by Rick Schulting offers the attractive topic of light stable isotopes in bones, which define the ratios between the terrestrial and coastal/marine sources of an animal or human diet. He comments on the different diets in particular communities that are archaeologically distinct, especially in Central and Northern Europe, the variability among males, females and children, lactose intolerance, and other fundamental questions of current bioarchaeology. Amy Bogaard and Paul Halstead in their chapter *Subsistence Practices and Social Routine in Neolithic Southern Europe* shed light

on the radical changes in the human diet between the late Mesolithic and early Neolithic in southern Europe. The most valuable part is entirely methodological. They comment on the visibility of specific phenomena in the bioarchaeological record, such as landuse, culling patterns, ratios between domestic and wild animals in the archaeological data, and other issues. László Bartosiewicz and Malcolm Lillie in their chapter *Subsistence Practices in Central and Eastern Europe* turn their attention towards the characteristics of the Starčevo and LBK, and younger communities, in order to understand how people managed their resources in variable geographical conditions, including wetland areas and drier landscapes with loess deposits. Of much value are their data from the Ukraine showing how the Neolithic period here is broadly connected with the surviving world of hunter-gatherers. This Mesolithic kind of subsistence in the Baltic region remained a protracted period until the Bronze Age. In the similar text that follows, *Subsistence Practices in Western and Northern Europe* written by Peter Rowley-Conwy and Tony Legge, an outline of the knowledge concerning the wetter and cooler zone of Europe is given.

The third section of Part III is called “Materiality and Social Relations”. From this part of the book, comprising fifteen chapters, we would like to point out only the last paper, written by Arkadiusz Marciniak and Joshua Pollard, titled *Animals and Social Relations*. From our perspective, it is one of the best bioarchaeological texts of the handbook, especially from the methodological point of view. The authors write concerning the difference between the traditional scope of archaeologists regarding animals as subjects of subsistence, and animals as beings with a symbolical and social role. The authors themselves regard animals as “sentient beings sharing many of the ontological qualities of people”. As known from earlier writings of the authors, animals were regarded as means of exchange, sacrifice and feasting. They describe the possible surviving hunter-gatherers modes of thought concerning animals in early agricultural communities, their restriction towards just certain species, and many other aspects of relations between humans and animals. Large domesticated animals in the European Neolithic represent a different order of categorization. The authors finally trace the associations of various species with different forms of place, memory and identity.

The fourth section “Monuments, Rock Art, and Cosmology” comprises nine

chapters, which follow some of the most visible symbols of the (mostly Late) Neolithic period: enclosures, chambered tombs, rock engravings, underground caves, and others issues, which bear witness to the Neolithic peoples’ beliefs.

From the perspective of bioarchaeology (and the scope of the IANSa Journal) the fifth section “Death, Bodies, and Persons” is rather important and we would like to mention here three texts. The chapter *Mortuary Practices, Bodies, and Persons in the Neolithic and Early-Middle Cooper Age of South-East Europe* by Dušan Borić is very interesting. He describes in detail the various burial habits across the various phases of the Neolithic and Copper Age in the denoted region. The main questions here are: how the funeral was executed, whether something was exceptional, and what was it? Giving specific examples, Borić approaches underground burials, graves, separate or double burials, and child interments. He recognizes on which side were inhumations placed, their gender, and if there is some preference in their orientation. Of course, Borić does not miss out on the goods left in the tomb. Like others, John Robb in his chapter *Burial and Human Body Representations in the Mediterranean Neolithic* begins with a definition of the Neolithic period in his focused areas. The task is separated into three areas: Italy, The Central Mediterranean Islands, and Iberia. Methods of burying in phases are included; however, the main theme is the human figure and its preservation through art. Robb enriches this knowledge not only with interesting documentation, but also with unusual events. As an example he writes about Ötzi’s mummy as substantial evidence of the human body. Finally, Daniela Hofmann and Jörg Orschiedt in their chapter *Mortuary Practices, Bodies, and Persons in Central Europe* discuss the notion of personhood, which is hot topic in current archaeology. Personality usually refers to how people believed themselves to be continued in the after life. They introduce the topic of body and embodiment as a theoretical concern and daily practice. Such a view should be a complementary part of bioarchaeology, informing us about our biological identity.

4. Conclusion: Debates in Neolithic Archaeology

The last part of the handbook (Part IV) summarizes the knowledge within the whole subject matter. Three different

scholars draw their conclusions on the content of the book and compare their own concepts of the Neolithic period. As Alasdair Whittle writes, it is difficult to sum up all the chapters in a brief paper. That's why he chose just four related topics in his chapter *Unexpected Histories? South-East and Central Europe*. In the first part, with the issue being "Beginnings", he draws on the whole concept of the book and solves the Neolitization question in several aspects. Whittle appropriately criticizes the lack of contributions with DNA analyses and research in the whole publication. In the topic Lifestyle and Production, he highlights the necessity of keeping the house in its social context, including models of garden cultivation and scales of animal breeding. In the third part, Community and Society, Whittle asks "How to characterize social relations in any one context?" He equally emphasizes that everything changes as time passes. Connected to all of this is the last part Kinds of History, where are described problems such as "shared life and death", "tensions between household and community, between descent groups and community and between local and outsiders". Whittle says, it is important to employ the opportunity to combine "macro" and "micro" scales. Finally, here is the one apposite sentence: "It is not only the big picture which should be in the frame".

Julian Thomas in his chapter *Commentary: What Do We Mean by "Neolithic Societies?"* offers maybe the most progressive and fruitful view on the Neolithic. He notes that some researchers call for a clear definition of what actually constitutes a Neolithic society. Is it farming

plus sedentism, increasing population density, social differentiations, and complex mortuary practice? Thomas notes that these characteristics are at variance with the extreme diversity of the Neolithic across Europe. On the most common level, the Neolithic system could be characterized by Marschall Sahlins' "domestic mode of production". There are differences between the regions of Southeast Europe and Northwest Europe. In the former region the early Neolithic should be defined by garden horticulture with a small number of stock representing an integrated and coherent economic system. But for the latter region, Thomas argues that the Neolithic also means a shift from plants to animals stimulating a change from a subsistence economy to a "wealth-based" economy, as cattle represent mobile capital. Other differences between Southeast and Northwest Europe are the long-lasting sites in the first region and the shortly-lived sites in the second, where they were supplemented by the existence of huge monuments with their role as communal loci. One crucial statement of Thomas is that "the Neolithic cannot be defined purely on the basis of the representation of traits and must be understood instead in organisational or structural terms". In this context, a crucial and formative phenomenon is the new arrangement between people and things. Julian Thomas underpins John Robb's statement from 2013 that "the advent of the Neolithic involved a changing relationship between people and things, from which it was increasingly difficult for communities to extricate themselves".

Finally, the third scholar, Kristian Kristiansen in the chapter *The Decline of the Neolithic and the Rise of Bronze Age Society* summarises reasons why the Neolithic transformed itself into the Bronze Age's social and economic systems. He offers a way of understanding in economical terms: "What were the historical conditions or forces that led to the decline of the Neolithic and the rise of the Bronze Age? I propose that there is a qualitative difference between Neolithic and Bronze Age social formations in prehistoric Europe, which fundamentally changed both their political economies. Consequently, once metallurgy was introduced and became integrated in the economy, the world would never be the same, and a Neolithic subsistence was no longer possible." Such complex economic reasoning is for Kristiansen connected with the origins of the family, personal property and gender divisions.

We can conclude that The Oxford Handbook of Neolithic Europe represents an important contribution to world literature. Little surprising is the long time between the completion of some of the chapters (ready in 2009, revised in 2011) and the date of final publication. In such circumstances, some very recent knowledge could not be included. The number of chapters based on our current knowledge of geoarchaeological and bioarchaeological methods is really not very high. On the other hand, all the chapters have been worked out precisely and responsibly. Therefore this volume could be regarded as a valuable editorial enterprise for an understanding of Neolithic Europe.

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