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## ***STUDYING THE NEOLITHIC: AN ARGUMENT AGAINST GENERALIZATION***

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**Abstract:** Articolul de față prezintă câteva subiecte incitante privind perioada neo-eneolitică, acestea constituind în opinia autorului o veritabilă provocare pentru arheologi. Neoliticul reprezintă o veritabilă entitate economică, culturală și cronologică. Pe la 6000 cal BC, oamenii din Balcani au început să trăiască într-un mod de viață diferit, adoptând noi tehnologii, exploatând noi resurse, folosind ceramica și construind locuințe durabile. Viziunea lor asupra mediului înconjurător s-a schimbat. Strategiile economice adoptate s-au modificat. Până de curând se considera că trăsăturile și elementele definitorii ale acestei perioade sunt omogene pentru tot sud-estul Europei. Însă, cercetările efectuate în Tesalia (Grecia) au demonstrat că acestea variau foarte mult. Progresele întreprinse în arheologie, în ultimii 25 de ani au condus la o mai bună înțelegere a fenomenelor socio-economice din perioada neo-eneolitică. La ora actuală majoritatea specialiștilor acceptă diferențele sesizate/existente între estul și sudul Balcanilor. Fiecare zonă prezintă trăsături particulare, în ciuda unor elemente generale oarecum asemănătoare. Neoliticul reprezintă o perioadă complexă, cu o structură specifică caracterizată prin elemente generale și particulare fiecărei zone. De aceea, la acest moment nu se mai poate discuta despre perioada neolitică la modul general, fără a se avea în vedere acest fapt, fiind necesară dezvoltarea unor metode diverse de studiu/cercetare. Experiența câpătată în cadrul proiectului Southern Romanian Archaeological Project (SRAP) ne-a dovedit că, în general, arheologii se axează/concentrează pe siturile mari – evidente, ignorând spațiile/zonile din exteriorul siturilor. Southern Romanian Archaeological Project și-a propus să cerceteze și aceste zone, pe lângă siturile mari, vizând stabilirea dinamicii locuirilor neo-eneolitice din bazinul râurilor Teleorman și Clanița. Cercetarea arheologică trebuie să meargă mai departe, în vedere înțelegerii cât mai exacte a comportamentului uman din trecut.

**Keywords:** neolithic, eneolithic, Balkans, Romania, Southern Romanian Archaeological Project.

### **Introduction**

We have long accepted and followed the traditional definition by which the Neolithic is portrayed as a clear and distinct cultural, social, economic and chronological entity, which we can locate with ease and excavate with surety from the archaeological record, and which we can reconstruct in a straightforward manner. Current thinking about European prehistory is challenging the stability (indeed, even the validity) of these definitions and it is questioning our passive acceptance of them. In this paper I outline some of the challenges that are eating away at traditional understandings of the Neolithic in southeastern Europe and I suggest some areas of research that would benefit further research.<sup>1</sup>

### **Breaking down the Neolithic**

On the one hand it is clear that from 6000 cal BC in the temperate Balkans (and half a millennium earlier further south in Greece), people started living their lives in new ways, adopting new technologies to exploit novel species of plants and

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animals, using ceramic pyrotechnology to produce a phenomenal range of vessels and other objects, and building new, durable places to live. Animals such as pig, dog and cattle which had been hunted for millennia were supplemented by new species such as sheep and goat; all were managed as domestics, though of course hunting continued as a significant component of social and economic activities.

The physical organization of people, places, resources and objects which followed the introduction of simple architectural constructions created new forms of social groups that were linked together in particular places and, in many cases, for long periods of time. People created new perceptions of the landscape (of its products and of the rights of access to those products) and new conceptions of how individual people (and groups of people) associated with or differentiated themselves from others. Social and economic life focused on houses and households within bounded villages, though at the beginning of this period, organization of people across social and natural spaces was more fluid and open. In many places, less permanent camps emerged before longer lasting villages. The firing of clay to make pots, tools, and figurines was a novelty that had fundamental consequences for how people lived their lives. In addition to the importance of pottery vessels as a new container technology, fired clay became a major medium with which (and literally upon which) occurred an explosion of symbolic expression.

The differences in the ways of living that distinguish the post-6000 BC Neolithic from what came before (even based on the very thin record that we have for that earlier period) are clear and fundamental. Early, principally economic, explanations of the changes that occurred at 6000 BC (e.g., Childe's powerful model for a shift from a food gathering to a food producing system; Childe 1936) assumed that these changes were absolute, occurred over a short period of time, had the same character and cause as did the changes that marked the appearance of the Neolithic in the southern Balkans at 6500 BC (i.e., Greek Thessaly), and were the result of individual events such as migrations of people or alterations to climate.

Until very recently, it has been acceptable to speak of a single way of early European life that was Neolithic. Even as mid-twentieth century developments in the application of nuclear physics to the absolute dating of the prehistoric past made it clear that the Neolithic appeared in different parts of Europe at different times (Renfrew 1973), it was still assumed that the collection of activities and technologies that made up the Neolithic was the same wherever and whenever it appeared; there remained the belief in the existence of an easily recognisable Neolithic package. More sophisticated work has broken down the assumed homogeneity of the Neolithic (see Whittle 1996; Thomas 1999). It is now clear that even within a single region, for example Thessalian Greece, there was significant variation in how different people lived their lives, indeed even in how the same people went about their lively-hoods at different times of the year or during the same season at a single site or even in various parts of one region (Whittle 1996; Bailey 2000; Halstead 2005; Kotsakis 1999, 2005; Souvatzi 2000, in press).<sup>2</sup> The recognition of such variation within a single landscape makes any attempt to generalize across larger regions and between parts of Europe foolhardy at best.

Over the past twenty-five years, significant progress in research on each of the constituents of the Neolithic package (i.e., sedentism, ceramic pyrotechnology, animal and plant domestication) has opened up our understandings in new and increasingly complex ways. For example, it is no longer accurate to speak simply about the domestication of plants; there are many different scales of relationship

between people and plants. Large-scale, field-based, crop cultivation of highly productive and robust species such as wheat and barley was a relatively late development in European prehistory.<sup>3</sup> Evidence for the wide-spread clearance of land for planting fields of crops does not appear in many regions in the archaeological record until the late Bronze or early Iron Ages (2500 BC) (Willis 1994, 1995). It is much more likely that the early selection and exploitation of particular plants were more heterogeneous processes that entailed the smaller-scale exploitation of both wild and managed species of plants which functioned through combinations of garden-sized plantings with sophisticated understandings of local wild resources.

In similar ways, the development of research into human-animal interactions that range well beyond simplistic ideas about corrals or farm-yard animals has exploded assumptions about the ways that early Europeans exploited animals (Higgs 1972; Ingold 1980; Sherratt 1981; Halstead 1998). A general claim for the economic importance of domesticating animals has been replaced with a set of subtle understandings not only of differing scales of animal exploitation (e.g., for primary and secondary products; via herding and grazing or hunting and managing wild stock), but also for different scales of consumption for the products of differently sized animals (Greenfield 1988; 1991, 1993, in press a and b; Russell 1998).

Even in these well argued fragmentations of the long accepted and simplistic understandings of plants and animals in the Neolithic, most current explanations retain a level of generalization that smoothes the data in an unrealistic way and presents the non-specialist reader with a charade that proposes that there was a particular Neolithic way of living that can be clearly and cleanly documented by the presence of domesticated plants and animals. Indeed, as debate continues to pick apart the increasingly fuzzy entity that archaeologists have called the Neolithic, it has become increasingly clear that none of the constituents of the original package occur without significant variation across the regions (indeed even within a single region) and through the several millennia of the period.

Other recent arguments have acknowledged the differences between the northern and southern Balkans (Halstead 1989; Greenfield 1993; Jongsma and Greenfield 2001; Greenfield and Jongsma in press a and b), have given more credit to the choices made by indigenous local pre-Neolithic inhabitants in adapting, adopting and rejecting particular elements from the Neolithic package of technologies, plants, animals and social organs (Zvelebil and Lillie 2000), and have argued the probability of a less exact, less complete, and less absolute transition to the Neolithic way of living (Zvelebil 1986, 1994; Greenfield and Jongsma in press a and b; Greenfield et al. in press). The concept of sedentism has been subject to similar assaults and critical re-definitions; it is no longer acceptable to assume that permanent buildings document year-round sedentism, that the inspiration for the construction of early architecture was simply the provision of shelter, or even that the same group of people could not exploit two apparently contradictory types of settlement systems (e.g., complementary villages of permanent houses and more mobile camps of temporary pit-features) (see papers in Bailey et al. 2005).

A major result of these refinements and redefinitions of the Neolithic and its constituent parts is that we no longer can speak of one Neolithic. There were many Neolithics; they appeared and disappeared at different times in one place at one time and at different places at different times. The distinction between what was

Neolithic and what was not has been irrevocably blurred both in terms of chronological sequence (i.e., the permeability of any boundaries of pre- and or post-Neolithic phenomena) and in terms of an individual definition of typical Neolithic behaviour (i.e., there are no universal activities that are represented by the terms animal and plant domestication or permanent sedentism). A fundamental consequence of breaking down the Neolithic as an archaeological construct is the devaluing of the earlier, easy explanations for the origins of the Neolithic which reconstructed a clearly defined parcel of goods, techniques and knowledges that could have been brought into southeastern Europe by migrating groups from the Near East. There was no one origin to the Neolithic lifestyle in southeastern Europe, nor even a set of easily identifiable events that caused people to change their lives in ways, and which (seen from the distance of 8000 years) appear as dramatic and radical. It is much more likely that the patterns of behaviour that eventually accumulated and which, as archaeologists, today we uncover, are the results of very gradual alterations, testings, adaptations, rejections, re-alignments, regressions and adoptions of a host of alternative components of living. Change was slow.

### **Consequences, implications and new directions**

The most important consequence of these arguments is the recognition that the 'Neolithic' as a concept (archaeological, social, or economic) is a coarse over-generalization. A term such as the Neolithic-way-of-life (just like the terms sedentism or mobility) has little utility as a tool to characterize human behaviour: there is too much variation in human behaviour for any one group to be trapped within the term Neolithic or, for that matter, to be defined as sedentary or mobile. The implications for us as archaeologists is that we need to look beyond the generalizations and we need to carry out research that recognizes that human behaviour ranges well beyond the limitations of these concepts. We need to start focusing on a new range of research questions and we need to develop research methods that are capable of delivering answers to our new questions. We need to think about the specifics of day-to-day living and we need to recognize that such specifics will vary and transform from one Neolithic day to the next, from one river valley to the next, and from one Neolithic person to the next. We need to start trying to understand how people who lived 6-8000 years ago thought about themselves and how they understood their relationships with others.

### **Examples from the Southern Romania Archaeological Project**

In the work that has been taking place in the Teleorman River Valley to the north-east of the modern city of Alexandria (Judeţean Teleorman), we have been wrestling with many of these questions.<sup>4</sup> While not all of our efforts have been completely successful, even in our failures we have learned much not only about human existence in the valley 7500 years ago but also, and perhaps more importantly, about how we might better succeed in redefining the Neolithic. As our work has developed, our relationship with the valley landscape has shifted and grown. One of our original research goals was to understand better the conditions under which people started to settle in the same place in the landscape over very long periods of time: i.e., why did tell settlements develop in this region in the fifth

millennium cal BC? In applying an intensive strategy of field-walking and geomorphological investigation (as well as more traditional excavation) we were able to draw some preliminary conclusions about one section of the river valley (the area between the modern villages of Măgura and Lăceni). The detail of our argument can be found in a publication that appeared in 2002 (Bailey et al. 2002). We suggested that the prehistoric changes in the character and position of the river in the Măgura-Lăceni section of the Teleorman Valley set the conditions against which (but did not directly cause) the gradual process of people building and living over longer periods of times at particular places on the edges of the valley bottoms (i.e., in those places that then became tells). However, while we were satisfied with our work on the origins of tells and the specific multi-disciplinary research that we had undertaken, we were less comfortable with the generalizations that our results tempted us to make. What were the broader consequences of our results? Just because we had recovered one pattern of fluvial dynamics at Măgura-Lăceni, could we simply apply the pattern and our interpretation of it to the origins of other tells in other parts of the Teleorman Valley, or in other parallel valleys (e.g., the Vedea), or in other valleys in other parts of Romania, or at the broadest scale, in other regions of southeastern Europe.

In carrying out our work on the problem of tell-origins, we found ourselves drawn to study of parts of the Teleorman Valley landscapes that traditionally had not been investigated. In this way, we were particularly excited when our fieldwalking teams found relatively dense concentrations of Boian Culture material out in the middle of the valley bottom at Măgura-Lăceni (for more details see Andreescu and Bailey 1999; Andreescu et al. 2002; Mills 1999a, 1999b; Bailey et al. 2002, 2004). This was not where we were supposed to find Boian material: there are local Boian sites but they are found up on the tops of the terraces, well above the river valley bottoms (Zaharia 1967; Mitrea and Preda 1959; Neagu 1999a, 1999b). To be honest, I had expected (and hoped) that our fieldwalking teams would find Gumelnița material out in the middle of the valley bottom. One of our original research goals had been to locate, map and excavate Gumelnița activities out in the landscape away from the Gumelnița tells which were distributed along the edges of the valley bottom (e.g., at Măgura and Lăceni). Later work, that we undertook down-river, in the valley bottom near the tell at Vitănești, did find concentrations of Gumelnița material away from that tell. All of this work in the valley bottoms had been stimulated by research that Ruth Tringham and I had carried out in northern Bulgaria that had asked similar research questions about the real boundaries of tell settlements and the vitality of the off-site landscape (Bailey et al. 1998). At the base of all of this work was a desire to examine the parts of Neolithic landscape which people had neglected: the parts of the landscape that are always left blank on archaeological maps, the places which lie abandoned in between the more impressive and better studied settlements and cemeteries.

### **Studying the margins and the gaps in the Neolithic landscape**

As a result of these efforts, it has become clear to me that, as archaeologists of the Neolithic, we almost always have studied the wrong thing. Our attention has been trapped by the wonder of tells and their cemeteries or the concentrations of

buildings at horizontally defined flat sites. It had become increasingly clear to me that it is not enough to study only the monumental and, relatively, easily located and excavated settlements and cemeteries; rather we need to study the less substantial and more ephemeral ways in which people engaged with their material, human, physical and symbolic environments. What was emerging in my mind was the idea that an archaeology of human existence between 6000-3500 cal BC should take place in the parts of the landscape that floated, isolated and abandoned, in between the official areas of Neolithic life; research should focus in the margins, and in the supposedly empty spaces of Neolithic lives and landscapes.<sup>5</sup> The more we learnt about the early Neolithic landscape in the Teleorman Valley, the more convinced that many participants of the SRAP project have become that during the Neolithic, the non-site landscape was full of people, ideas, places, activities, and engagements of people and things. We became convinced that by focusing on the big, obvious sites, we are missing a huge portion of Neolithic life, the life that took place out in the middle, between sites, at the margins of sites, and in the gaps between places. We are convinced that these are the important places and that it is on these places that we must focus our attentions and research energies.

#### **Filling the gaps: work on soundscapes**

While the overall SRAP research continues (we are currently excavating a complex of Criș, Dudești and Vădăstra features), several members of the team have completed innovative projects that have pushed our thinking provocatively beyond the limits of traditional research and towards the investigation of the gaps and the margins of Neolithic life. The most detailed of these examples is the work that Dr Stephen Mills carried out (Mills 2000, 2001, 2005a, 2005b). Mills was interested in how people engaged the landscape at the Măgura-Lăceni reach of the Teleorman Valley, specifically in the ways in which people might have experienced different parts of the landscape in the Neolithic. Mills made a series of sound recordings investigating the distribution of acoustic information<sup>6</sup> of different parts of the Măgura-Lăceni reach and discovered that important differences in the characters, densities and ranges of acoustic information distinguished different parts of the valley-bottom.

Based on his analysis of the acoustic information gathered, Mills concluded that there were three main parts of the Măgura-Lăceni landscape. The first part was the eastern, edge zone of the valley. Here, there are many different sources of acoustic information that often occur at the same time. In acoustic terms, the 'auditory scenes' in this zone are consistently busy and, because the different kinds of acoustic information are tightly woven, the fabric of the acoustic composition is dense and complex. It is polyphonic. Importantly, it is in this area that one finds the establishments of tells in the Neolithic. The second zone of the Măgura-Lăceni landscape that Mills isolated is the grasslands of the open valley floor. Here there are fewer and disparate sources of acoustic information, and the acoustic fabric is loosely interwoven. The grasslands of the open valley floor is acoustically simpler and more porous compared to the eastern valley edge zone. In the open valley floor, the fabric is sometimes polyphonic but often monophonic (single source) or homophonic (predominately a single source but accompanied occasionally by

others). A fabric of this texture informs people that there is often little happening in the immediate surroundings; there are few birds, animals and other people nearby and therefore few resources and few opportunities for interaction. Acoustic information dissipates easily. The form of the composition is generally monotonous and slow. It has a low complexity.

Mills' third acoustic zone at Măgura-Lăceni is the area of the river and here the acoustic fabric has an intermediate or heterophonic texture. On some occasions, this zone is polyphonic (particularly when people and their animals are present). At other times it is mono- or homophonic. The river zone is one of medium acoustic complexity; the acoustic form is more flexible, punctuated, and disjointed. For much of the time there is little variation, it is slow and then intermittently there are sudden or short bursts of acoustic information when people and their animals are present. There is often much acoustic information when rivers are used as resting/watering places. River-crossings are places of transition between topographic and vegetation zones, between meadows and grassland.

The interested reader should consult Mills' publications for the full details and consequences of the research on acoustic information. What is important to the argument that I am making in this paper is that by thinking in new ways about how people experienced life (especially in parts of the landscape other than those traditionally studied), Mills was able to construct a very different map of the Măgura-Lăceni research area. Furthermore, by studying conditions of acoustic dynamics, Mills' work got to the heart of Neolithic people's living experience of these places. Like much of what SRAP is attempting, Mills' work demonstrated how Neolithic landscapes can be characterised along what are not archaeologically traditional dimensions (e.g., sound). Importantly, these alternative dimensions are extremely non-monumental: sound does not last and the brilliance of Mill's work is that he created a way of recovering a potential dynamics of sound that has relevance to understanding the Neolithic experience of the landscape at Măgura-Lăceni. Work carried out by other team members has investigated the dimension of sight through and across the landscape (Trick 2002, in press), and a current project created by Gary Jones is examining the landscape in terms of short-lived encounters between people, animals, insects, and other ephemera.<sup>7</sup>

### **Research questions for the study of the Neolithic of southern Romania**

The work carried out by SRAP poses a range of particular research questions about the Neolithic which seek to break down our traditional understandings of that period of time in this particular region. The SRAP questions are not the only questions that can be asked nor are they necessarily the ultimate questions – in fact, if they have any value, it will be in stimulating other questions and methods which will quickly and concertedly benefit from what we haven't been able to achieve. Other research questions need to be addressed and, in an ideal world (with unlimited funding, time, personnel and facilities), SRAP would pursue these in future work. Perhaps others may find these topics of interest as a stimulus for research. The hidden agenda behind these topics is the destruction of the traditional definition of the Neolithic, with its stable and static components of origins, evolutions, economies, and collapses. It is a call to overturn 'checklist' archaeology: we can no longer just

dig and check-off items on a list that defines a clearly defined Neolithic: domesticated cattle (check), pottery (check).

One potential aim of future research, as discussed above, is to examine the assumed homogeneity of Neolithic landscapes: this requires a more refined recording and understanding of Neolithic sites which can only be obtained by detailed work with handheld GPS units and selective exploratory trenching of sites. What were the relationships between the major sites (such as tells) to each other (i.e., were they all in use at the same time, or were they seasonally re-occupied, or were they left empty for long periods of time – see Bailey 1999 – was there an ebb and flow of people into, out of, and around sites such as tells)? Equally important, what were the human relationships between the major sites like tells and the surrounding landscape. Were these landscapes really empty? What sorts of activities can we recover from them?

A second research aim is to focus on the gaps and the margins of the Neolithic. This requires intensive fieldwalking and excavation by many small sondages across wide areas of apparently empty landscapes. It also requires us to think in very different ways about what are the important parts of the archaeological record. Does a burial have one type of significance to us as interpretive archaeologists which is different (though not necessarily better or greater) than does the ephemeral traces of more mundane daily events and encounters?

A third potential aim is to better understand the pre-Neolithic activities in these landscapes. This requires not only fieldwalking, sondaging and larger excavation, but it also requires a deeper understanding of those activities that must have continued from pre-Neolithic to Neolithic periods (see Bailey and Whittle 2005; Boric 2005; Kotsakis 2005; Thissen 2005). We need to re-examine the ways that we create explanations of origins of periods and cultural phenomena. It is more than likely that our continued acceptance of a clean, uni-directional break between the Mesolithic and the Neolithic is unsupportable and that many of the activities taking place in the Neolithic landscapes were also taking place in the Mesolithic landscapes.

A fourth potential research aim is to better understand the relationships between changes in the environment (e.g., climate and fluvial geomorphology) and changes in the patterns of Neolithic human behaviour. How much explanatory power should we allow reconstructions of climate and soil development? It is highly unlikely that changes in climate directly caused changes in social activities or patterns of human behaviour; more likely is that such environmental changes have importance as markers for indirect and inconsequential changes in the physical backgrounds against which Neolithic lives were lived.

## **Conclusion**

These four proposals of potential research represent a handful of many areas of research that would benefit from further attention. We could apply many of the same questions, which I have directed here at the study of the Neolithic in southern Romania, to the study of other parts of the Neolithic across southeastern, central, and western Europe. We could trace the same issues through other periods as well (the Bronze Age appears particularly relevant). In conclusion, the aim of these suggestions is the same as the aim of this chapter: to push forward



the study of past human behaviour in new and provocative ways that will overturn existing understandings of the past and set in motion an ongoing questioning and re-questioning of our enquiries. If this discussion has stimulated thought and reaction, then it will have served its purpose.

## Notes

1. A longer, more detailed discussion of some of the themes contained in this article can be found in Bailey (2000) and in the papers included in Bailey et al. (2005).
2. The same is true to the north in the Northern Balkans (Greenfield 1993, 2000, in press a and b; Greenfield and Jongsma in press a and b; Greenfield et al. in press).
3. It is clearly not evident in the Early Neolithic of the northern Balkans (Greenfield and Jongsma in press a and b; Greenfield et al. in press a).
4. Work has been funded by the British Academy, the Society of Antiquaries of London, Cardiff University, the Teleorman County Council and the Romanian Ministry of Culture and has been directed by this author with Radian Andreescu, Steve Mills and Pavel Mirea.
5. In his recent paper on the archaeology of tells, John Evans has discussed the value of looking away from the obvious sites and settlements (Evans 2005).
6. Acoustic information recognises that sounds are encoded with information about the environment in which they are created and through which they pass/propagate - it is ecologically structured and not reducible to raw data or sensations.
7. I am indebted to Gary Jones for allowing me to mention his ongoing doctoral research (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council).

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