Identities of the Early Neolithic Balkans

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Session abstract:

The circumstances that brought the beginnings of the Early Neolithic in the Balkans and a rather rapid spread of farming/agricultural societies from the Aegean up to the northern fringes of the Great Hungarian Plain in the last centuries of the 7th millennium BC remain enigmatic despite years of intensive research. The apparent paucity of Mesolithic settlements across the region has favoured migrationist models in which farmers from Anatolia and/or the Levant were the primary agents of change. Nonetheless, patches of strong and 'complex' Mesolithic presences as well as the existence of local routes for the acquisition of obsidian and flint have also been identified in the Balkans and may speak in favour of the active involvement of local foragers in these changing historical circumstances. Yet, identities seen as “forager” and “farmer” are complex and often instable constructs that probably over-simplify any situations in the past.

Along which axes were identities defined in this 'new world' of the Neolithic: the mode of production (i.e. foraging vs. farming), pottery style, symbolism, beliefs, language, and/or something else? How fixed or permeable were the boundaries between different identities? Finally, was it the identity and individuality that mattered or relationality and individuality? Hence, we need to test whether our reliance on pottery or mode of production supports definitions of specific culture groups that we have inherited from culture historical approaches. Were there ever unifying 'Mesolithic' or 'Neolithic' ways of being? We invite contributors to this session to consider how we might identify and theorize different types of coexisting and overlapping identities and modes of being, and the application of such insights to case studies from the Balkans. We thus hope to move beyond theoretical proxies and orthodoxies of inherited scholarly debates.

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14) John Chapman (Durham) & Bisserka Gaydarska (Durham): What kinds of persons created themselves in the Early Neolithic?

Abstracts:
Borders of identities. Ancestry and traditions in the Neolithic of Greece
Kostas Kotsakis (Thessaloniki)

The conventional wisdom construes the Neolithic of Greece as a phenomenon of migration of farmers from the Near East or Anatolia. Consequently, the cultural aspects of the Neolithic tend to be considered as a version of the original culture. While the mobility of people and therefore of some cultural traits cannot be directly denied, the immovability of content of these traits is highly debatable. Interesting differences within the Neolithic cultures recognized by current research can identify diverse overlapping traditions, which probably have a longer lineage than that usually presumed in the relevant literature. Pottery and its uses offer a revealing example, in that being a cultural trait pertaining to variable social domains, creates a privileged area of communality and conflict. It therefore allows us retrospectively to cast a glance on the ancestry of the conflicting and coexisting traditions of the Greek Neolithic.

The identity of the Early Neolithic in Thessaly, Greece
Nina Kyparissi-Apostolika (Athens)

Thessaly is recognised as the birthplace of the Neolithic in Greece. Most of the initial settlements of this period seem to have been founded at its western part, in mainland Thessaly, at an extended plain surrounded by mountains. In Theopetra Cave, at the westernmost edge of this plain, remains of the very initial phase of the Neolithic were found, while some other settlements are located at the neighbouring prefectures of Trikala and Karditsa. Until the beginning of the Late Neolithic, almost exclusively this part of Thessaly attracted the Neolithic population. Afterwards, it seems that the population moved eastwards near the sea (Pagasitikos Golf). Settlement remains indicate a rather well organised life, with a large number of domesticated animals, as well as a good percentage of hunting activities, well fitted to the mountainous surroundings, to support the nutritional habits of the population. Plant remains suggest a well organised cultivation too. Wild species of some of these plants were also found in Theopetra Cave, allowing one to speculate about indigenous domestication of plants. Pottery seems to have been quickly taken up, while a number of “precious” objects, possibly for decoration, appeared very early. In the Late Neolithic, these objects became the topic of organised commerce that reached central Europe. The role of clay figurines is still debatable since in certain cases a figurine type is found only in one settlement,
while in other cases there are several different types of figurines that communicate among settlements. Architectural remains indicate that the natural material sources were exploited and very early houses were well constructed and decorated. In some of them people were buried, while no organised big cemeteries, like in the Balkans, are known. The population seems to have grown gradually reaching its peak in the Middle Neolithic when a real explosion of new settlements must have taken place in the area.

**Beyond the Aegean: The Early Neolithic perspective from the Ionian islands, western Greece**

Georgia Kourtessi-Phillipakis (Paris)

Discussion about the Neolithisation in Greece has principally been focused on the Aegean considered as a key-area on the path of human migrations and cultural diffusion from the Near East to South-East Europe. The object of this contribution is to raise the interest in western Greece and particularly the Ionian islands where a Mesolithic background is obviously present. Available data from this region will be considered in their wider geographical context with the aim at understanding the circumstances that brought the Early Neolithic mode of production in this area and to outline some principle activities as the exploitation of natural resources and the organization of subsistence and craft production. Finally, we will try to emphasise particularities of emerging identities of these Early Neolithic societies in such an insular environment.

**Modern quests and past identities: The case of the start of the Neolithic in the Balkans**

Zoï Tsirtsoni (Paris)

The question of the start of the Neolithic period is one of the most debated in the archaeological literature of the Balkans from the very beginnings of the discipline. The reason is probably that the first permanent habitation in the region (or at least what is usually thought to be so) is considered by many not only as the first decisive step towards “civilised life”, but also as the first chapter of modern states’ history.

Contrary to what one might believe, this is far from being just the product of local scholars—Greeks, Bulgarians, Yugoslavs, Albanians or Romanians. Indeed, not only have foreign, Western scholars been directly implicated in the research of the early periods (from Heurtley and Rodden to Perlés and Bailey), but Western theoretical schools and methodological trends have affected more or less directly (and for more or less noble motifs) the local developments.

So, the present debate about the identity, or the identities of the first Neolithic inhabitants of the Balkans, cannot be fully understood — and even less tried to be answered — without taking into consideration those that preceded it. For it seems to me that, in spite of the change in our vocabulary, the true issues remain very much the same. The “local Mesolithic forager” model as opposed to that of the “exogenous Neolithic farmers” could thus be the latest version of a long lasting debate, which concerns the question of supremacy in modern rather than in prehistoric Europe.

**New evidence on the Early Neolithic culture in the Upper Thrace**
The data from several Early Neolithic sites in south-east Bulgaria are considered in the report. The site Yabalkovo is situated in the central part of the Upper Thrace, in the very valley of the Maritsa River. Since 2000 we have carried out rescue excavations at the site and revealed the outline of a big open-air settlement with very rich materials. The other two open-air sites discussed are situated in the East Rhodopes. The excavations there have been carried out some decades ago but the artefacts have not been discussed in detail. On the basis of the presented evidence an effort is made to characterize the local cultural features as well as to outline the common Anatolian heritage in the pottery-styles, tools, figurines, etc. At the same time, some differences in cultural traits seen in Thracian tells are discussed with regard to the differentiation in supplying strategies and economic models.

**White painted decoration: Stylistic diffusion and development of local identities**

Goce Naumov (Skopje)

White painted decoration has been seen as the most characteristic feature of the earliest Neolithic groups across the Republic of Macedonia. However, there have not been attempts to analyse such motifs with regard to the regional specificities of the white painted decoration. First, this paper analyzes the patterning of specific white painted motifs that have direct analogies in decorative motifs found in Anatolia. The compositional structure of decorative motifs is analyzed as well as a spatial homogeneity of visual decorative patterns across Anatolia, the Aegean and Macedonia. Second, the analysis proceeds to local decorative features that developed into unique styles of particular areas in later phases of the Neolithic.

**Language of artefacts: The earliest Neolithic in the central part of northern Bulgaria**

Nedko Elenski (Sofia)

The present article examines the question of the cultural identity of the settlements dated to the earliest phases of the Neolithic that are situated along the basin of the Yantra and Russenski Lom rivers. These sites are Beliakovetz, Djuliunitza, Koprivetz, Orlovetz, Pomoshlitza, and Hotnitza-“The Cave”, all dated in the third quarter of 7th millennium BC. Particular artefacts from these sites and their traits are compatible with the Anatolian and the Mesopotamian traditions of the Early Neolithic. Apart from these characteristics, there are elements that can also connect these sites to Balkan traditions. The probable reason for this relates to a process of taming of and acquainting with new environments, which lead to a new definition of communities. The Early Neolithic was the time of both unique and common identities.

**The latest news about the Early Neolithic in north-western Bulgaria**

Georges Ganetovski (Sofia)

An Early Neolithic settlement was found in 1994 in the area of Valoga (also known as Dolnite Laki). It is situated 1,5 km to the north-east from the village of Ohoden, Vratsa region, on the left bank of Skat River. Systematic archaeological explorations of the settlement over the area
of 235 m² were carried out from 2002 to 2006. The exploration was focused on a dug-in structure (a dwelling) filled with a large number of pottery, flint artefacts, animal bones, charcoal, and burned materials from the destruction of the destroyed walls and roof. The stratigraphy, construction and inner organisation of the dwelling was defined. The dwelling has an oval shape with E-W orientation. It was dug in 0.4 and 0.6 meters. Typical tunnel-like and tube-like handles were found. Among numerous flint artefacts there were ‘microlithic’ tools – segments, trapezes and chisels.

From 2004 to 2006 explorations of a facility situated about 25-30 meters north-east of the Early Neolithic dwelling were carried out. This feature was dug into the ground and one of its part had a ditch-like shape (resembling a corridor) and was oriented north-south. It was dug into the ground about 0.30 – 0.40 m and was 14 m long. A line of three columns was recognized in its northern part. A grave of a female individual (of about 25 – 30 years of age) was placed in a left-sided foetal position in the central part of this feature. Traces of “cult feasts” (ashes, broken pots and burned animal bones) were found. A second grave with a skeleton of a child (around 5 years old) was found in a right-sided foetal position in the southern part of the structure. These field observations give us reasons to assume that the structure was a sacral facility built for burials and rituals connected to them.

Data show that the dwelling, the burial facility and the two graves belonged to the end of the "Monochrome Neolithic" or the beginning of the 6th millennium BC. The cultural-chronological belonging of the structures can be dated to the second period of the Proto-Starcevo. This is the first thorough exploration of a well preserved dug-in dwelling and intramural burial facility containing foetal-positioned burials in a burial pit with archaeological context and archaeological records from the period of the Monochrome Neolithic on the territory of north-western Bulgaria.

Mesolithic traces in Early Neolithic cultures of Serbia

Dragana Antonović (Belgrade)

The territory of Serbia was densely inhabited from the very beginning of the Neolithic. A relatively large number of Early Neolithic settlements across the region implies that the same territory almost certainly was similarly settled during the Mesolithic. The large number of Early Neolithic settlements implies the continuity from the previous period – the Mesolithic. In spite of the fact that very few Mesolithic settlements were recorded on the territory of Serbia, it is possible to record Mesolithic traces in the Neolithic cultures, which testify the cultural continuity between the Mesolithic and the Neolithic. Mesolithic traces are visible in several aspects of Neolithic cultures in Serbia: single-layered settlements, the predominance of foraging, and, especially, on the basis of the characteristics of stone industries. It seems that the beginnings of the Starčevo culture represented the initial phase of a somewhat autochthonous Neolithisation of the Mesolithic milieu.

Prehistoric population dynamics in the Danube Gorge: A case of local continuity, replacement or admixture?

Ron Pinhasi (London)
During the Late Glacial Maximum (LGM) the Danube Gorge acted as a major refugium to various biotic species, including humans. Early Mesolithic populations from this region were therefore isolated during a long time span from other contemporaneous European populations. Several millennia later, the first Neolithic cultures appear in this region. Archaeological studies of these cultures highlight the complexity of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in this region as they point to a myriad of cultural and biological processes that interacted in the formation of the Danube Gorge Neolithic. The extent to which the neolithisation process in the region involved the influx of exogenous populations or was mainly a local biological process of transition remains a highly disputed issue.

In this paper, we address the issue of population replacement, admixture and local continuity in the Danube Gorge region by investigating intra and inter regional craniometric population affinities. The craniometric dimensions of Mesolithic and Neolithic skeletons from the Danube Gorge are assessed in relation to those of various European Mesolithic and Neolithic specimens from neighbouring regions. Results indicate a complex sex-specific pattern with varying degrees of differentiation between Mesolithic and Neolithic crania.

The time span of the Starčevo culture in northern Croatia

Jacqueline Balen (Zagreb), Katarina Gerometta (Zagreb) & Marcel Burić (Zagreb):

The Starčevo culture characterizes the Early Neolithic period and the neolithisation process in northern Croatia. Its developmental phases were determined mostly by typological and stylistic characteristics of pottery. However, flaws in such definitions of developmental stages have become obvious since some pottery forms and ornaments do not fit into generally accepted chronological schemes. The aim of this paper is to use recently obtained radiocarbon dates to shed some light on the development and the time span of the Starčevo culture in northern Croatia.

The creation of identities at the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition in south-east Europe: A multi-proxy approach

Clive Bonsall (Edinburgh), Robert Payton, László Bartosiewicz (Budapest) and Dimitrij Mlekuž (Ljubljana)

The rapid expansion of farming from the Aegean to the Hungarian Plain favours monocausal explanations polarised around the local adoption/migration dichotomy. However, there is now emerging evidence that different (historical) processes lay behind this seemingly uniform expansion. What were those processes? How are different identities of Early Neolithic groups (pastoralists, village farmers, hunters ...) related to those processes and how were they created? We make use of various lines of evidence — archaeological, chronometric, edaphic, genetic, palaeoclimatic, and taphonomic — to investigate this problem.

What kinds of persons created themselves in the Early Neolithic?

John Chapman (Durham) and Bisserka Gaydarska (Durham)
When we conceptualise the emergence of the Neolithic, we tend to think of innovations in behaviour, whether symbolic and place-based (the domus – agrios structure) or grounded in material culture (widespread innovations in sets of artifacts). It is only recently that prehistorians such as Chris Fowler and Andy Jones have started to grapple with the emergence of different kinds of personhood dependent upon such changes. We would like to go a little further by suggesting that new places and things could not possibly have been created without the reflexive emergence of new kinds of person – people whose skills were never seen before because they did not exist before.

During these generations, new types of person were created, in particular the ‘farmer’ and the ‘herder’ but also the ‘potter’, the ‘polished stone tool-maker’ and perhaps the ‘brewer’. These new types of person co-emerged with new foodstuffs and objects, such as flour, bread, lamb chops, barley beer, fine and coarse pottery and gleaming axes – the one could not have occurred without the other. Notions of personhood would have been influenced by the wide range of new relations, not least gendered relations, based upon these identities, as well as by their interplay with traditional types of person – ‘hunter’, ‘shellfish-collector’, ‘flint-knapper’ and ‘leather-worker’. The communal values of the new products went hand in hand with the status of their creators. The discovery of secondary products would have ushered in still more episodes of person-creation, seemingly beginning in the Early Neolithic, with ‘dairy producers’ producing milk, cheese and yoghurt, while ‘ploughmen’ harnessed animal traction. The values assigned to the new things transformed the traditional system of communal values, itself confirming new statuses for these new types of person.

In this paper, we seek to stimulate a debate over the terminology proposed here, thereby exploring the consequences of a vivid new world itself created by the interactions of a wider variety of persons than had ever been seen before.