

Although assessing ethnicity in archaeology is a challenging issue, the effort to include it in the debate is more than welcome. In Patagonia, ethnicity has been a marginal topic in research circles, while regional interactions were more deeply discussed in terms of mobility and territoriality and through the use of archaeometric proxies (e.g. stable isotopes studies and geochemical analysis of obsidian). Regardless of their different traditions and approaches, the archaeology of the Pampas and Patagonia for the late Holocene shows an increasing capacity for dealing with social-dependant topics that were poorly treated only a couple of decades ago.

The book reviewed here is the most complete synthesis of the history of hunter-gatherer societies from the Southern Cone of South America; it is essential reading for scholars and students interested in what happened there between 14 000 years ago and the nineteenth century.

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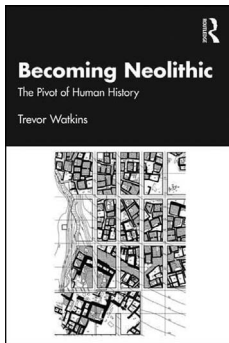
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TREVOR WATKINS. 2023. *Becoming Neolithic: the pivot of human history*. Abingdon: Routledge; 978-0-415-22152-8 paperback £35.99.



In *Becoming Neolithic*, Trevor Watkins offers a new perspective on the Early Neolithic Transition (ENT), in which the economic, social and ideological transformations that led to the Neolithic in Southwest Asia, between 14 000 and 8000 years ago, are detailed. As with any quality piece of intellectual work, the text has several levels. It is a fascinating lecture for the public wishing to know more about an intriguing period of human history; it is also an up-to-date and fully informed academic monograph for archaeology students and a ground-breaking and thought-provoking hotbed of fresh ideas for scholars who, like me, try to understand this complex subject. The book has 12 chapters, starting with an Introduction, in which the need for this book is justified.

New data, analytical methods, refined discussions and a theoretical framework, and the cultural evolutionary theory have emerged during the past 20 years. In this book they are presented by a reputed expert, providing a renewed explanation of an old subject.

Chapter 1 shows the dynamic background of the scene (geography and climate) and the collective actors (demography). Chapters 2 and 3 refer to the two main shifts in the acquisition of food resources, the transition from foraging to farming and from hunting to herding. The following five chapters explain the process of the ENT, by splitting it into four interconnected phases: the Early Epipalaeolithic (chapter 4), as the prelude of the process and the Late Epipalaeolithic (chapter 5), when complex hunter-harvesters laid the bases for the transition; the Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic (chapter 6), a period of dynamic innovation in

socioeconomic structures; the Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic (chapter 7); and finally the climax before the dispersal of Neolithic groups, changing the history of Eurasia (chapter 8).

Despite the complexity of the historical process being described, the narrative flows gently, keeping the interest of the reader with a set of data and explanatory theories that are logically linked. One of the main achievements of the text is how it aptly combines past and present research. Instead of writing a specific chapter about historiography, for example, Watkins describes previous work spanning 100 years as new concepts and ideas are introduced throughout the text. This embedded strategy is also used to familiarise the reader with the main archaeological sites.

The Neolithic transition is presented as a long-drawn-out and multi-regional process, which has its roots in the Epipalaeolithic and was facilitated by changes in different regions in Southwest Asia, which, following their own cultural dynamics, came up with a global cultural transformation.

After a comprehensive description of the cultural shifts, chapters 9 and 10 are the most innovative and influential parts of the book. Chapter 9 introduces the theoretical framework necessary to understand the ENT as a pivotal phase in the human cultural evolution. Watkins explores the diverse explanations theories in recent research—from the ones thought to be caused by climatic change that brought on an imbalance between population and resources to the fascinating theories of Jacques Cauvin and Ian Hodder—but finds them either inconsistent or not explanative enough. He then turns to ideas on the evolution of human cognitive capacities and new evolutionary theories, aimed at integrating genetic, epigenetic, behavioural and symbol-based dimensions of human evolution. Watkins concludes that the Neolithic is a pivotal phase of the gene-culture co-evolution.

Next, the main concepts of this cultural evolution theory are introduced. Firstly, there is no simple explanation and no sole triggering factor for cultural shift (e.g. climate, demography, etc.) but there is an ensemble of reciprocal causations prompting co-evolutionary feedback loops to emerge. Secondly, in the framework of the niche-construction theory (NCT), humans modified their environmental, economic, social and symbolic niches in a way that, consciously or unconsciously, provoked an accelerated period of runaway cultural dynamics, and brought on the emergence of a new phenomenon: the Neolithic. Thirdly, the unique human capacity to create cumulative culture is based on the high-fidelity transmission of cultural elements and in the capacity to innovate.

Chapter 10 sketches out the application of this cultural evolutionary framework to the ENT and the main question *why did the ENT take place there and then?* The potentials were present in some regions of Southwest Asia, which were extraordinarily rich in plant and animal resources. Watkins explains the ENT in continuity with the Palaeolithic cultural evolution, but with a transformative change in tempo and scale. Multiple triggering factors promoted accelerated trends in innovation rates and simultaneous extension of cultural products, skills and capacities. The transformation of the human cultural niche provoked the expansion in demography and group sizes. Epipalaeolithic communities gathered in more sedentary settlements, practising the Kent Flannery's broad-spectrum revolution, consuming a wide variety of resources, which represents the first phase. During the Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic incipient agriculture and husbandry allowed the appearance of fully sedentary villages, where communities articulated religion as a mechanism to ensure social cohesion.

The third Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic phase saw the rapid growth of villages, where plant and animal domesticates were exploited—some became megasites, which were interconnected by a complex network of exchange and interaction.

The final fourth phase witnessed the abandonment of the big sites and the spread of smaller and less densely built-up settlements. During this phase, more elaborate farming technology allowed the expansion of human communities into the dryer areas of Southwest Asia and beyond, from north-west Anatolia into the Balkans, from western Anatolian coastlands into the Aegean and mainland Greece, and from the Zagros into East Iran, starting a process that would definitively transform the history of Eurasia. Contrasting with the classical vision that stresses the importance of the third phase, with its big villages, Watkins with good judgement, claims the fourth phase to be the crucial culmination of the cultural evolution. He presents a comprehensive evolution of the ENT and recognises the acceleration in the rate and range of cultural accumulation in artefacts, skills, knowledge and concepts. This was accompanied by the appearance of larger, more intensively interconnected populations, constituting super-communities made up of networked settlements. Overall, this proposed structure and explanation is logical.

However, in my opinion, some incongruences emerge in this too-smooth narration. Why is the impressive symbolic architecture of phase 2—such as in Göbekli Tepe, which was so important for social cohesion—no longer used in the following phases of the ENT, when population size of villages impressively increased? If population size and interconnectivity is so important for innovation and cultural dynamism, why is the culmination of the process and its expansion then performed by smaller and autonomous Neolithic groups? These discontinuities between phases lead me to wonder whether the process that tends to be presented as a crescendo in evolution, hides more internal contradictions and no-end paths than suspected.

Having arrived at this part of the book, most readers will find that something important is missing from the whole picture. The archaeological record of the monumental architecture, for instance in Jericho or at Göbekli Tepe and the richly ornamented houses at Çatal, have delivered astonishing evidence of the symbolic world human communities had before becoming farmers. This mindset is not integrated in Watkins's explanation, but is discussed in Chapter 11 *The problem of the Neolithic revolution*. The author highlights different theories used to interpret the symbolic world and then decides against the most common explanation of the Neolithic as the period when religion, temples and gods made their appearance in human minds. The chapter points out that there is no reason that human depictions of the period are gods, even if some of them are monumental in size, or buildings with complex iconography and architecture, as those at Göbekli Tepe, are to be understood as temples. Instead, the Neolithic can be considered as a transegalitarian society with individuals wanting prestige, but there is no sign of institutionalised status. He opts for respecting the socio-religious framework proposed by the evolutionary theorists, down-playing the scope of the Göbekli buildings, which are interpreted as places for meetings, maybe led by prestigious individuals, around the memory of respected ancestors.

The contradictions between the evolutionary scheme and the interpretation of the archaeological record will stir the curiosity of scholars, stressing the need to establish a dialectic dialogue between the evolutionary framework and the historical facts and methodologies. The difficulties of integrating the symbolic mindset into the evolutionary theory—which, in this framework, is treated as an epiphenomenon of a process of acceleration in the innovation capacities—

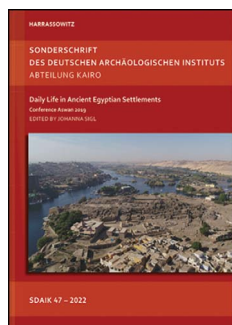
demonstrate that cultural evolution is only a part of the story. Judging by the investment of the Neolithic groups, symbolic thinking was considered as crucial by the ENT protagonists, so we should look for more holistic interpretations beyond the functionalist interpretation of religion. Integrating the symbolic dimension into the socioeconomic evolutionary and historical process is, most probably, the new frontier of the ENT investigation. To end, I would like to congratulate Trevor Watkins for this piece of research and synthesis that is highly recommended for those who want to know more about the Neolithic, the pivot of human history.

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JOHANNA SIGL (ed.). 2022. *Daily life in ancient Egyptian settlements: conference Aswan 2019* (Sonderschrift des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo, vol. 47). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz; 978-3-447-11834-7 hardback €89.



The volume under review comprises 10 chapters, most of which focus on the Middle Kingdom (c. 2040–1750 BC). The content is based on papers presented at a conference organised by the German Archaeological Institute (Cairo) at the International Museum of Nubia (Aswan) to mark the 50th anniversary in March 2019 of the Elephantine project. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, some papers presented at the conference were not submitted for publication. Therefore, the editor Johanna Sigl states in the Introduction that the volume “can be understood neither as an Elephantine anniversary nor a conference volume per se, but it represents a small collection of papers addressing various aspects of daily life in Ancient Egypt through time” (p.4). Following the Introduction, the contributions are organised into three thematic sections: ‘Households and productive activities’; ‘Settlement development and hinterland’; and ‘Space and sensory experience’.

Clara Jeuthe’s chapter, ‘Insights into the routines of daily life in Ayn Asil during the Middle Kingdom’, discusses the early Middle Kingdom changes and developments of the so-called Governor’s Palace of Ayn Asil (Balat in the Dakhla Oasis) and opens the first thematic section. Based on rich *in situ* assemblages issues of daily life and work routines are addressed, as well as the functional and spatial analysis of the discovered structures.

‘Daily life in an Egyptian Red Sea harbor: Ayn Soukhna during the Old and Middle Kingdoms’ by Claire Somaglino provides an overview of the ongoing analysis of various aspects of the daily life of Egyptian mining crews during these periods at the northern end of the Gulf of Suez. The research is based on architectural remains, material culture (such as pottery and tools)

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