At the time that Assemblage first approached Alasdair Whittle to write a retrospective and, we hoped, self-critical review of Neolithic Europe: a survey (1985), the latter, like Andrew Sherratt's secondary products model, seemed ripe for revision. In both cases, it transpired, major volumes were imminent from the respective authors attempting just such a task. Under the circumstances, we are sure Whittle will agree that a review of his recently published follow-up is in order. We intend to review Sherratt's forthcoming collection of papers in a later issue.

**Europe in the Neolithic - the creation of new worlds**

Alasdair Whittle


Review by Willy Kitchen

Alasdair Whittle addressed the Archaeological Society here in Sheffield over a year ago now, when it was clear that he had undergone a major change of heart since the publication of Neolithic Europe: a survey (1985). As Whittle himself points out in this issue, this earlier survey was very much "a child of its times" (see "Keeping Going"). Of the passages which I can remember having read, it was positively monolithic, a plethora of data only occasionally relieved by true interpretative insights, and largely informed by the processual models of the late seventies and early eighties. In terms of its theoretical orientation, Europe in the Neolithic (hereafter EN) is certainly very different, and Whittle summarises its key themes in "Keeping Going" (hereafter KG): indigenous acculturation and enculturation; mobility and gradual settling down; attachment to place; new attitudes to time, descent and beginnings; novel material culture connected to food, drink and sharing; continuity of shared ideals and values; competition and community. If you are the sort who likes labels, it is hard to resist dubbing this an idealist account. In Whittle's own words, "The challenge is to try to think imaginatively about other lives" (EN: xv); "What mattered were the values guiding or framing people's activities and relations with each other and the world" (EN: 370). Philosophers and social theorists are still kept at arm's length, but the work of several archaeologists who draw extensively from such sources, Hodder and Barrett amongst them, are often referred to in the more interpretative passages.

As Whittle argues, "we all need to work harder at the craft of writing" (KG), and accordingly I consider it appropriate to assess Whittle's own craft in this review. His preface stresses the importance of narrative, but I was at times unable to grasp the thread running through sections of the book, and his narrative style can barely be considered imaginative. Each of the major chapters begins with a rather half-hearted vignette, evoking, more often attempting a description of, a site, burial or - not for the first time - the last moments of the Iceman's Alpine journey. This device, appearing increasingly in the literature (in several Batsford texts for example), cannot serve to make literary or affective a text which remains conservative in its many other facets. Whatever else you may think about Hodder's The Domestication of Europe (1990), the thread of the particular story he chooses to tell can be glimpsed on almost every page of his book. Only periodically, however, does the true flavour of Whittle's Neolithic emerge, most successfully for me in the chapters on central and western Europe. Here the homogeneity of the LBK evidence ensures that the text does not fragment into a
litany of variegated culture groups and localised sequences, and Whittle is able to keep his themes of indigenous change and convergence, time and descent, beginnings and community, to the fore. When regional sequences fragment in this context too, following the passing of the LBK, he is still able to argue in relation to the rise of monumentality that "the LBK/Danubian tradition would have been a powerful common element over very broad areas" (EN: 250). By contrast, the early chapters on south-east Europe in particular can occasionally be confusing geographically and temporally, not least for one ill-versed in the intricacies of Balkan and Eastern European geography, and sometimes degenerate into extensive cultural catalogues. The situation is not helped by the paucity of maps and chronological tables, offered in abbreviated form once every chapter (if you're lucky). As a "broad-canvas synthesis" (KG: 2), at least some potential readers should, I believe, be assumed to be as ignorant as me.

Whittle acknowledges some of the commonplace shortcomings of the synthetic genre (KG), but in referring to the limited geographical scope of other recent publications addressing the British Neolithic (KG), he serves only to highlight the fact that in EN too the British Neolithic is confined almost exclusively to southern Britain, with brief expeditions only to the Scottish Islands and to Langdale. Is he here falling between two stools? Either his is a broad-canvas synthesis or it is not. Chippendale's editorial comment in the latest issue of Antiquity is perhaps relevant. Chippendale would, I suspect, deem Whittle's a "grand synthesis of some kind" (Antiquity, 70:241). If true grand synthesis is now, due to the sheer volume of data and publication, a "lost cause" (as Chippendale appears to accept), then Whittle is to be commended, however, for his insistence that the "art" (read here craft) of selective synthesis also needs more attention. My fear is that he has only come a limited way down the road from Neolithic Europe: a survey, with much of the earlier work's format and structure retained in the present work. Too much thick description is sacrificed to the exigencies of thin detail. I can only speculate as to the extent to which publication within the Cambridge World Archaeology series, with a remit to publish "a survey of the archaeology of a region of the world", may have curtailed Whittle's expressed desire to break free of outmoded styles of writing and presentation.

Don't get me wrong; I enjoyed the book. It will undoubtedly be read by students, professionals and academics alike, and deserves to be, although it will be a brave student who does so cover to cover. For those, like me, whose research interests lie primarily in Britain, the two introductory chapters and those on central and western Europe (chs 6&7) should suffice, at least to begin with. Although the story does not build in quite the same way as Hodder's Domestication of Europe, key themes do emerge, particularly in these four chapters. According to Whittle, Mesolithic "foragers" are knowledgeable actors, and the characterisation of Neolithic peoples as "farmers" is perhaps anachronistic. Hodder's domus:agrios model is suggested to be "still rooted in a modern, Western conception of the autonomy of the household", mistakenly taking "the emergence of sedentism from the beginning of the Neolithic for granted" (EN:70). Acculturation, enculturation and convergence among and between Mesolithic and Neolithic peoples are seen as fundamental to the working out of different histories in a still mobile social world. In the case of presumed LBK colonisations, Whittle believes we are rather seeing indigenous change arising out of an earlier ethic of co-operation and integration, and blossoming in the context of a growing sense of place, community and shared identity. Likewise, Gimbutas's large population movements and demographic change are denied for south-east Europe, proto-Indo-European at best representing a shared "language of communication" spreading across the Continent (EN:363), and the Mediterranean is the site of more indigenous metamorphosis.
Sociopolitical models are treated with a healthy amount of distrust, particularly in the later phases of the Neolithic, so that sites such as Los Millares are said to have "served to create and then bond a wide sense of community" (EN:349) rather than being interpreted as indicators of increasing social stratification.

Returning to the chapters on central and western Europe, first longhouses and then megaliths are argued to have framed social landscapes, being "embedded in an idea of wider social action" (EN:165), and providing "the focus of an unstable world" (EN:167). In between, later LBK enclosures were "a means of defining place and establishing a routine of returns and permanence" (EN:176), much as Whittle argues both for south-east European tells and Iberian walled enclosures. Whilst the similarities between Ertebølle and post-LBK cultures are stressed, it is this emphasis upon boundaries, naming and categorisation which is said to be a defining factor over an altogether "less momentous" Mesolithic-Neolithic transition (EN:370). People were "building a tradition or idea of permanence and order" (EN:191) whilst maintaining "the rhythms and obligations of tethered mobility" (EN:192). Routine and returns, ancestors and origin myths, and "ways of telling the world into existence" (EN:210) were the foundations of a new sense of self and belonging, and are critical to Whittle's account. Relying upon Barrett's distinction between ancestor and burial rites, Whittle sketches a landscape in which "the living and the dead were linked in a collectivity of shared existence" (EN:261) and where through time ancestral houses became communal ossuaries whilst the ancestors themselves were "increasingly taken for granted" (EN:266). Even the Corded Ware complex "can be seen to have massive continuities with what went before" (EN:284). The common threads include spiritual and religious belief and relations between people.

Whittle wonders aloud whether he has successfully applied a decade of developments in British interpretative approaches to the European Neolithic as a whole (KG). Within the very tangible limits of my own reading on the subject, I would have to conclude that he has, but that there is room to go much further. Whittle's treatment of the nature:culture dualism is problematic (EN:209; it is not easy to see how a polished stone axe is more "cultural" than a carved bone harpoon point, for example) and it worries me a little that some of the concepts Barrett, amongst others, has applied to the British Bronze Age, for example (Barrett, 1994), are now being used to explain events in Europe two or three thousand years earlier. I would rather we do not fall into the trap Shanks and Tilley identify of explaining millennia of prehistory in terms of the same recurring models (1987:56), although the conceptual world must remain central to all our accounts of prehistory, from whatever period. Perhaps, a few years down the line, we might look forward to a synthetic "History of Prehistoric Thought". In the meantime, we should all remember that our individual accounts do not become narratives merely because we label them so. Despite the increasingly common post-processual refrain, we are still waiting for a truly novel account to emerge, in any period or place.

References:


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