

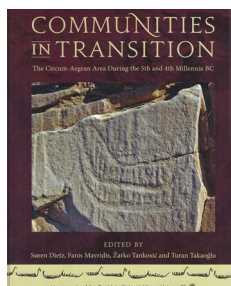
Review article

From grand narratives to multiple scales: space, life and process in Neolithic Greece and beyond

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SØREN DIETZ, FANIS MAVRIDIS, ŽARKO TANKOSIĆ & TURAN TAKAOĞLU (ed.). 2018. *Communities in transition: the Circum-Aegean area in the 5th and 4th millennia BC*. Oxford: Oxbow; 978-1-78570-720-9 £70.

APOSTOLOS SARRIS, EVITA KALOGIROPOULOU, TUNA KALAYCI & EVAGELIA KARIMALI (ed.). 2017. *Communities, landscapes, and interaction in Neolithic Greece* (International Monographs in Prehistory: Archaeological Series 20). New York: Berghahn; 978-1-879621-47-3 \$39.



In accordance with wider epistemological shifts arising from post-modernist and post-colonial critiques, archaeology has reconsidered its traditional focus on large scales of space and time, and shifted towards a more

active inclusion of smaller scales. This shift is informed by concepts of agency, practice, relationality, ontology and other social theories, and shows an increasing concern for context, scale, diversity and interaction. Although this shift did not come easily and has not always resulted in a comprehensive, integrative theory, it has still led to a burgeoning and promising literature.

Both volumes considered here represent these changes and offer lively insights into Neolithic societies in Greece, the Balkans and West Anatolia. At the same time, they demonstrate the growing developments in Greek Neolithic studies, the explosion of new data and the emergence of new research questions. Each volume has a distinctive focus, but they complement each other in more ways than one, e.g. in geographic, temporal, thematic and theoretical coverage. They

both derive from international conferences held in Greece, one (*Communities, landscapes and interaction*) in Rethymnon, Crete in 2015, the other (*Communities in transition*) in Athens in 2013, and several authors have chapters in both volumes.

Communities, landscapes and interaction takes a more explicit and encompassing view of social space and ways of life in Neolithic Greece, emphasising diversity of both archaeological data and interpretations, multiplicity of analytical scales and social complexity. It contains 30 chapters, including a concise overview by the editors, and is organised in three thematic parts: ‘Communities, social spaces and dimensions of Neolithic lifeways (and death)’, investigating settlement and habitation patterns; ‘Landscape dynamics and subsistence practices’, examining ways in which landscape is constructed, conceptualised and experienced; and ‘Interactions and material perspectives’, exploring exchange patterns and regional and inter-regional connections, mostly through pottery and stone tools (7 out of the 10 chapters in this section), and with a welcome emphasis on the mobility of people, goods and ideas. While this partition achieves vigorous coverage of fundamental aspects, the sections address their respective themes largely in isolation from one another (and often in overlapping ways), leaving it to the reader to make connections. The complete absence of a framing introductory section and particularly of a concluding section further leaves the reader at a loss. The volume succeeds in its stated aim of showing “the diversity of finds, methods and interpretations” (*Communities, landscapes, and interaction in Neolithic Greece*, p. 4), but certainly not of providing “a synthesis volume” or “a comprehensive and detailed coverage” (*Communities, landscapes, and interaction in Neolithic Greece*, p. 1). This would have required a pair of concluding chapters at the very least. A second caveat is the very partial geographic coverage. The balance tilts heavily towards central and northern mainland Greece, and, to a lesser

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extent, the Peloponnese. The islands, which form a core part of Greece, are heavily underrepresented (only 3 out of 30 chapters), while Crete, the Dodecanese and the South-eastern Aegean islands are totally absent. Similarly, caves, another important feature of the Greek landscape, are also very sparingly addressed (presumably because the editors wish to focus on ‘the village community’?), as are intra-mural burials and the many classes of material culture other than pottery and stone tools (with one chapter on figurines).

In contrast, *Communities in transition* is more coherent, offering full geographical coverage, in which islands and caves figure prominently and which also includes Greece’s neighbouring regions. An extended introductory section provides six chapters on overarching themes of the volume (although, again, the lack of any concluding chapter after 57 individual contributions is frustrating). *Communities in transition* focuses on the transition between the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age in the regions around the Aegean, including Greece, the Balkans, Turkey (West Anatolia) and Cyprus in the fifth and fourth millennia BC (a phase also known as the Final Neolithic and widely assumed to be a ‘gap’ or ‘missing millennium’ due to the scarcity of data). It also explores socio-economic changes and transformations that occurred during that period and how they resulted in what we know as the Bronze Age. It includes 57 contributions, plus the editors’ Introduction and a Preface, and is divided into five parts: ‘Introductory and overarching studies’, ‘The Balkans’, ‘North Greece and Thessaly’, ‘West, central and south Greece’, ‘Aegean islands, Crete and Cyprus’ and ‘West Anatolia’. This geographic division, justified by the editors as aiming to avoid artificial thematic division and overlaps works well for this particular subject. In their Introduction, the editors choose to discuss the volume’s aims and contents, following a thematic rather than geographic organisation and attempting “to supply the reader with a practical companion to the volume” (p. xiv). These themes include: ‘Chronology, cultural affinities and synchronisation’; ‘Material culture: from production and technology to circulation, consumption, use and meaning’; ‘Changing social structures and economy’; ‘Inter- and intra-site use of space, settlement patterns, caves’; ‘Site reports and regional perspectives’. This thematic discussion is very helpful in that it instantly reflects the volume’s interests and the topics addressed by most of the chapters. References to the many contributors are, however, made only by name without a corresponding chapter—or at least section number.

This makes it very difficult for the reader to navigate through the volume and to locate individual chapters of interest immediately. In any case, the volume provides a very useful investigation of the socio-economic organisation of later Neolithic communities and of their perceptions of continuity and discontinuity. An important advantage of this volume is that it brings together scholars working in different regions united by their shared research questions and the need to reconsider their approaches.

Given the limited space available for this review, it is impossible to do justice to the 30 individual chapters in *Communities, landscapes, and interaction in Neolithic Greece* and the 57 in *Communities in transition*. In what follows I comment on some larger issues that represent central themes of common interest both among the books under review and within wider archaeology.

What I found most surprising is the striking absence in both volumes of a systematic attempt, at least by the editors, to theorise or even to define some of the various social concepts and notions used. Given the choice of ‘communities’ as the first term in both books’ titles, and the much advertised focus on ‘the village community’ (*Communities, landscapes, and interaction in Neolithic Greece*), one would expect an explicit concern with defining this concept at least, yet there is none. Most authors take their concepts for granted, employ them without much comment and do not avoid alternating use of different social forms. While *Communities in transition* has six introductory chapters, their themes are extremely varied and it is not clear how exactly they are articulated with each other and with the volume’s perspectives. The Introduction for *Communities, landscapes, and interaction in Neolithic Greece* states that a general aim of the project is “to demonstrate the [...] theoretical developments in the study of Neolithic Greece” (p. 1), yet it is not until over 300 pages into the volume with the chapter on social interaction by Nikos Efstratiou that theory gets any systematic treatment. Setting conceptual boundaries around major social notions is essential in order to avoid abstraction and confusion. It would have also served to anchor the volumes in an explicit theoretical discourse.

‘Community’, and its relationship with ‘village’ and ‘settlement’, requires attention and should not be taken for granted. Not all community members necessarily reside within a village (or the same settlement) at any given time (inasmuch as not every settlement

necessarily qualifies as a ‘village’), and a community can exist through multiple networks and spatial scales of interaction. After a long use of bounded views of community, archaeology has moved towards a reconceptualisation of it as a social entity with flexible boundaries. In the same vein, it is notable how few of the contributors engage explicitly with community-related themes, such as the interaction between household and community, kinship, the social relations of production and distribution, or the sexual division of labour. Among the exceptions, Tankosić and Katsianis (*Communities, landscapes, and interaction in Neolithic Greece*, with a related chapter by Tankosić in *Communities in transition*), using survey data from southern Euboea, shed new light on the (generally under-investigated) communal land management. Smith too (*Communities, landscapes, and interaction in Neolithic Greece*), in an insightful paper, suggests that a series of burials and burial practices on the Argolic Gulf can be seen as evidence for the construction and reinforcement of group identity within an imagined Argolic community. Stratouli and Metaxas, and Mastrogiannopoulou (all with relevant chapters in both *Communities in transition* and *Communities, landscapes, and interaction in Neolithic Greece*) also demonstrate how the use of caves as communal, inter-regional spaces for ritual purposes contributed in the construction of a sense of community beyond the spatial confines of the settlement. These are actually good examples of hybrid or diasporic communities based on translocal relations and processes, even though the authors do not always utilise them to showcase these points.

Another larger issue concerns complexity. Social complexity has always held a prominent position in prehistoric research (habitually with a heavy reliance on the grand models of social evolution), seeing complexity as equated with hierarchy, history as teleological and goal-directed, progress as technological advancement and societies as dichotomously classified either as simple (i.e. egalitarian) or complex (i.e. unequal). Interestingly, in reading these two volumes, I was continually confronted by a picture of flux and ambiguity, and by processes, trajectories and social choices that do not fit into such typologies. It is regrettable that neither volume develops this. While most individual chapters refer generally to social complexity, only Maria Mina in a tremendously thought-provoking chapter in *Communities in transition* offers a detailed and theoretically informed account, whereas others reproduce ideas deeply embedded in social evolutionism, albeit

implicitly. Mina questions the habitual over-emphasis on metallurgy as the culmination of prehistoric societal achievement and as the path to ‘complexity’, advocating the disentanglement of metallurgy from both an inevitable hierarchical social organisation and technological determinism. Similarly, Smith (*Communities, landscapes, and interaction in Neolithic Greece*, p. 389) astutely points out that “it is unrealistic to characterise something as contextually sensitive and conceptually slippery as ‘complexity’ as a fixed evolutionary stage”, and he moves on to suggest a view of complexity beyond binarism and as inherent in all social forms.

Likewise, the archaeological tendency to focus on transitions and dramatic take-offs in order to analyse change, with all their connotations of a decisive break with the past, has formed the core of grand historical narratives. It is very uplifting that *Communities in transition* on the whole embraces a new view on transition by effectively demonstrating that past and present co-exist in many ways and on many levels, and that there is no gap between them. As Renfrew (*Communities in transition*, p. 10) succinctly puts it, “The perception of a ‘gap’ or a ‘missing millennium’ over the timespan c. 4500–3500 BC is an illusion: it arises from the decline in the Aegean of one settlement type, the tell, which [...was...] replaced by a very different phenomenon, the proto-urban coastal centre in the centuries before 3000 BC”. His argument aligns with that of Psimogiannou in *Communities, landscapes, and interaction in Neolithic Greece*, that “most archaeologists continue to use the word ‘transition’ when referring to the Final Neolithic period, despite the fact that it is a period that lasted for almost 1,500 years” (p. 199), and that “the Final Neolithic period [should be seen] in its own right” (p. 200). Indeed, the nature of this transition was so multi-faceted and diverse, as many authors in *Communities in transition* demonstrate, and its duration so long that it requires the rewriting of prehistoric narratives.

A final remark concerns analytical scales. Both volumes are to be congratulated for showing an appreciation of the many spatial and temporal scales existing within any kind of archaeological dataset, reflecting wider attempts at multi-scalar analysis in contemporary archaeology. What is missing, as in much of archaeology in general, are mid-level theory, which can combine generalisation and particularisation, and mid-scale analytical units or domains that will enable examination of the different scales

simultaneously rather than consecutively. While many authors in the two volumes incorporate different scales and units in their chapters, they examine them independently of each other. Very few actually account for the interplay between the macro- and micro-level, or the inter-linkage of processes at different scales. One such example is by Parkinson, Ridge and Gyucha in *Communities in transition* who utilise multiple geographic and temporal scales to understand settlement nucleation and dispersal in the later Neolithic in South-east Europe, comparing different settlement patterns in the Hungarian Plain, Eastern Thessaly and the Peloponnese throughout the Neolithic. Avoiding the problem of linking scales also poses an obstacle to building a consistent analytical frame for a historical outlook on prehistoric societies. Despite the professed interest, particularly in *Communities, landscapes, and interaction in Neolithic Greece*, to “focus on micro-histories” (p. 1) and “Neolithic histories” (p. 2) and to “[articulate] intensive and

multi-faceted histories” (p. 4), history is barely or even not addressed, and certainly not articulated.

In sum, both volumes reviewed here provide exciting evidence for the continued vitality of social space and social life, and address issues of wider archaeological interest, some of which were presented here. Despite their theoretical shortcomings, they offer powerful and nuanced analyses, as well as regional research agendas and directions for future studies that will better integrate macro- and micro-scale analysis, and will offer a more comprehensive approach. Whereas *Communities in transition* forms a focused and cohesive collection that rewards reading as a whole, *Communities, landscapes, and interaction in Neolithic Greece* offers comprehensive treatment of a number of fundamental aspects of space and life. Both books can be considered important for those interested in the Neolithic of South-east Europe, the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean.