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Reviewing the Classics

Colin Renfrew. *The Emergence of Civilisation: The Cyclades and The Aegean in The Third Millennium BC*. (Oxford: Oakville, CT: Oxbow Books; David Brown Book Co. 2011, Reprint of 1972 edition with foreword by John F. Cherry, 634 pp., 34 b/w illustr., maps, pbk, ISBN 0977409465)

Any attempt to investigate the history of archaeological thought (or for that matter any other discipline), involves a journey back in time, or as Kuhn (1970: vii) once described, an ‘exposure’ to ‘out-of-date theory and practice’. Similarly, the attempt to revisit Renfrew’s emblematic work *The Emergence of Civilization* fifty years after its initial publication, is a study of a certain ‘past’. The book has been written and published, it is something that has already happened. It constitutes the concretized outcome of diverse, writer-oriented processes concerning a particular object of study (assumptions, intentions, experiments, conclusions) but also processes that move beyond the subject and object of this work, processes in other words, that formulate the broader historical context within which this work was made possible.

If we sought to elaborate further on this twofold scheme, we could argue that Colin Renfrew, the author of *The Emergence*, set as his main aim to produce a novel theoretical framework for Aegean prehistory that would provide an *explanation* for the appearance of the ‘civilized’ palace economies of Crete and mainland

Greece during the Bronze Age, drawing upon evolutionary theory and systemic thinking (Binford, 1965; Flannery, 1968). To achieve this, Renfrew made a systematized effort to expose the assumptions of traditional (cultural-historical) archaeology and called for a transformation of the discipline into a *science*, a mode of understanding able to objectivize its subject through *explanation* and *causality* as opposed to constraining itself to the mere documentation of spatiotemporal variability in past material culture. Within this theoretical framework, the emergence of the ‘palaces’ was seen as an evolving and cumulative process leading from ‘simple’ to ‘complex’ forms of social organization. The notion of the ‘system’ (in this case, the environment, populations, and settlements of the Aegean region) was deployed to specify the analytical boundaries of a societal unit but also to determine which ‘sub-system’ (subsistence, crafts, trade, communication, etc.) had the potential of bringing developmental changes to that unit. In the final section of *The Emergence*, Renfrew proposed two explanatory models for the appearance of the ‘palaces’: the first was the development of a redistributive

economic system for a new spectrum of subsistence resources (most notably olive oil and wine); the second was the advent of metallurgical activity and maritime trade leading to the emergence of a stratified society, where high status was inextricably associated with material wealth.

In the re-publication of the book, which appeared in 2011, John Cherry wrote an engaging foreword describing in detail the broader context within which Renfrew's work was initially launched. He rightly points out that 1972 was an *annus mirabilis* for the discipline of archaeology (2011: xxiv), for this was the time when a very important set of works also made its appearance in the broader archaeological forum, amongst others, Lewis Binford's *An Archaeological Perspective*, David Clarke's *Models in Archaeology*, Marshall Sahlins' *Stone Age Economics*, and seminal papers by Kent Flannery on the cultural evolution of civilizations, as well as Michael Schiffer on archaeological and systemic context. Cherry stressed that in 'the disciplinary scene onto which *The Emergence* exploded in 1972', there was 'a palpable sense—one could almost hear the creaking sounds—of a discipline changing direction, renewing and transforming itself in very significant and sometimes unexpected ways' (2011: xxiv). In this respect, *The Emergence of Civilization* was not only the outcome of an individualistic intellectual enterprise but also part of a far greater project, reflecting the crystallization of a new epistemological hegemony, a fresh way of understanding the past, or perhaps, a novel 'tool', a new 'technique' for engaging with that past: a New (Processual) Archaeology was finally deemed possible, breaking free from its long standing pre-scientific predecessors (Martin 1971).

For two decades after its publication, *The Emergence* continued to be accorded a status of undisputed analytical value in

early Aegean studies. From the 1990s onwards, however, this highly persistent core of agreement slowly began to dissolve. Aegean prehistory began to go through several notable changes some of which were stimulated by a growing body of empirical data and new techniques of investigation, others however were the result of far deeper transformations, challenging the very backbone of the discipline: the 'palace' category itself. On the one hand, the plethora of 'palaces' and 'palace-type' buildings that were discovered on the island of Crete posed serious questions about their role as markers of institutionalized hierarchy in the Aegean region. On the other hand, equally serious concerns were raised over the close association that had been posited between 'complexity' and the 'palatial' periods for it now appeared that the periods prior to the construction of the 'palaces' also exhibited 'complex' sociopolitical features.

The need to establish a new interpretative era for Aegean prehistory that would not involve 'civilization', 'palaces', 'evolution', and 'social complexity' as building blocks gradually became collectivized. The most moderate voices amongst the proponents of this new trend urged for greater sensitivity towards empirical detail and a greater effort to produce 'fine-grained' interpretative models that would emphasize the 'local', the 'particular', the 'idiosyncratic' at the detriment of anything reductionist and/or essentialist (such as the 'palace' and/or 'complexity' questions). Echoing theoretical transformations that began in British academia already from the early 1980s (the so-called 'post-processual turn'; cf. Barrett, 1994; Hodder, 1986; Shanks & Tilley, 1987; Thomas, 1996), more radical voices in the Aegean archaeology forum called for the need to introduce alternative approaches to social organization and power (e.g. 'factional competition', 'heterarchy'), as well as a wider

spectrum of new theoretical concepts, such as ‘agency’, ‘identity’, ‘networks’, ‘experience’, ‘corporeality’, ‘performativity’, and ‘sensorial perception’ (cf. Driessen, et al. 2002; Barrett & Halstead, 2004; Hamilakis, 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; Schoep et al., 2012; Terrenato & Haggis, 2011). The introduction of this highly versatile theoretical arsenal to Aegean prehistoric studies went hand in hand with a newly emerging thesis: it was suggested that the past was made possible through the active engagement of knowledgeable subjects with the (material) conditions of their existence, in the same way that the archaeologists who sought to understand past life were active subjects capable of enriching their interpretations with an infinite number of new standpoints (Hamilakis, 2002b: 15–16).

Roughly until the mid 2010s, Renfrew’s *The Emergence* remained at the centre of analytical critique. The main reason behind this tendency was the firm belief that this work was the leading advocate of the old regime in Aegean studies, a condensation of a broader school of thought, a greater tradition within which other texts and authors had subsequently found a place. The severe scrutinization of the book was thus taken as an essential step—if not a prerequisite—for the development of a new perspective in Aegean archaeology.

Interestingly however, *The Emergence* was a work that did far more than its rivals ever expected: not only did it operate as a reference point for an entire era in the history of the discipline, but also determined the very possibilities and rules for theoretical divergence in the years to come. The book triggered the formation of theoretical thoughts, ideas, and concepts which were diametrically opposed to its own fixed viewpoint, and yet unable to operate independently from the discourse that *The Emergence* initially founded. Put simply, *The Emergence* defined the

direction of any subsequent discourse to an unprecedented degree, for any new approaches essentially operated as an organized *anti-thesis* to Renfrew’s explanatory schema.

This striking directionality can be seen in the fact that for the majority of the literature produced at the aftermath of *The Emergence*, reference to Renfrew’s book was literally inevitable. What is far more crucial however is that particularly in the last decade, the constant ‘revisiting’ of *The Emergence* and its eventual ‘deconstruction’ left Aegean archaeology with no ‘enemy’ to situate itself against. The picture emerging nowadays is perhaps more fluid than we can handle: a steadily growing body of empirical data, an inevitable emphasis on the ‘micro-scale’, and very limited effort to address broader historical questions. A possible exception to the above would be the suggestion that the emergence of the ‘palaces’ could be replaced with the concept of the ‘House’ as a valid theoretical schema for the comprehension of social structure in Bronze Age Aegean societies (Catapoti, 2005; Relaki & Driessen, 2020). Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether this new theoretical framework indeed establishes an entirely new paradigm for Aegean prehistory or whether, in fact, it continues to revolve around the main theoretical axis of *The Emergence*. For instance, let us not forget that in using terms such as ‘elite’, ‘hierarchy’, or ‘complexity’, Renfrew does not connect them in a linear fashion with particular social structures/formations. As such, these may well accommodate socio-political dynamics amongst and between households, kin groups, settlements, or broader (sociopolitical or geographical) territories (Catapoti, 2005: 204–5).

In light of the above, one could perhaps argue that the conscious attempt to move beyond *The Emergence* in recent decades, also turned our heads away from the

details of this work, a work that actually exhibits clear signs of dynamism and experimentation, as well as intellectual dilemma, agonizing, inconclusiveness, and uncertainty. At the end of the day, which work after the publication of this book dared to offer two explanatory models of equal analytical weight as a compass for assessing social change in Aegean prehistory? And by extension, what precisely renders subsequent approaches to this question more dynamic than Renfrew's vision?

The tendency to categorize intellectual works at a paradigmatic level is a common trend in post-processual archaeology and it is precisely because of this tendency that the 'centrifugal' properties of any given work (such as the ones noted above with regard to *The Emergence*) are usually lumped into a single, homogeneous 'whole'. Interestingly, this polemic and highly reductionist attitude towards the past of the discipline seems to be in sharp contrast with the analytic attitudes directed towards the study of the past itself. While in the former case, archaeologists have no reservation in producing broad-brush categorizations and judgements (i.e. *The Emergence is New Archaeology*), in the case of the actual past the only thing they allow room for is 'diversity', 'detail', and 'subjectivity': in a way, the history of archaeological thought ought to be tamed while the past ought to be liberated. This highly contradictory element characterizing contemporary archaeological discourse and the suggestion that a return to Renfrew's seminal study, in search of dynamic—even innovative—elements that have remained unnoticed or undervalued may well indicate that a profound rethinking of Aegean Prehistory could be closer than we think. Internal contradictions and pending issues witnessed in past writings (in similar lines to internal contradictions and pending issues in the study of past

life) are the essential means for conceptual rearrangement and by extension, the construction of new, overarching questions and categories. In this respect, as the past itself, so does the *Emergence* resist and insist. Still present. Still visible. Inexhaustible. Thankfully.

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Whitney Battle-Baptiste. *Black Feminist Archaeology* (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2011, 200 pp., 13 b/w illustr., 2 tables, pbk, ISBN 978-1-59874-379-1)

When I first read *Black Feminist Archaeology* in 2011, I thought, ‘it’s about time’. After all, Maria Franklin (2001) called for a Black feminist-inspired archaeology ten years earlier, and it seemed logical that historical archaeology in the Americas, especially the southeastern United States and Caribbean, would quickly integrate a theoretical approach that could add deeper understanding and nuance to our writing about the past. Other African diaspora contexts and colonial sites in Africa would surely follow quickly. It seemed that the constant growth of socially conscious theoretical approaches, and the (unfortunately slow) increase in professionals with personal commitments to intersectional analysis would make applying Black feminist

theory to archaeological interpretation inevitable. While many archaeologists cited Franklin’s work, very few seemed prepared to fully commit to the Black feminist-inspired archaeology she advocated for until Battle-Baptiste’s *Black Feminist Archaeology*. Ten years after publication, I see that it was not timely; rather, it was ahead of its time.

The book is both deeply scholarly and deeply personal. It opens with a foreword by Maria Franklin, followed by an Introduction where Battle-Baptiste describes her positionality and her dual commitments as an academic archaeologist and as part of the broadly constructed descendant community she investigates. Each of the following chapters, except the last, starts with a personal narrative that provides broader context for