Book review

Julian Thomas

The Birth of Neolithic Britain: An Interpretive Account. xi+508 pages, 105 figures. 2013. Oxford: Oxford University Press; ISBN 978-0-19-968196-9 hardback

The Birth of Neolithic Britain is the fourth major work by the acclaimed Julian Thomas, one of the leading proponents of interpretive archaeology or archaeology informed by philosophy, anthropology and discussions in the arts and social sciences in general. After exposing the assumption and prejudices of archaeologists' narratives of the Neolithic and presenting innovative explanations of the shift from hunting-gathering to farming as well as other issues in *Rethinking the Neolithic* (1991; reworked and updated version *Understanding the Neolithic* in 1999), questioning Western conceptualisations of time, identity, materiality with the help of archaeological case studies in the 'Heideggerian' *Time, Culture and Identity* (1996) and further contextualised archaeology as part of a (post)modern worldview in *Archaeology and Modernity* (2004), this book seems to be a relevant continuation of Thomas's work. This is probably the first significant work on Neolithisation since Graeme Barker's global overview *The Agricultural Revolution in Prehistory* (2006, Oxford: Oxford University Press), this time with a focus on Europe and particularly Britain.

The book is divided into thirteen lengthy chapters organised and titled in a way which adds clarity to the structure of the text: (1) Introduction: The Problem, (2) The Neolithisation of Southern Europe, (3) The Neolithisation of Northern Europe, (4) The Neolithisation of Europe: Themes, (5) The Neolithic Transition in Britain: A Critical Historiography, (6) Mesolithic Prelude?, (7) Times and Places, (8) Contact, Interaction, and Seafaring, (9) Architecture: Halls and Houses, (10) Architecture: Timber Structures, Long Mounds, and Megaliths, (11) Portable Artefacts: Tradition and Transmission, (12) Plants and Animals: Diet and Social Capital, and (13) Conclusion: A Narrative for the Mesolithic-Neolithic Transition in Britain. While not claiming to be a complete survey of Neolithic archaeology in Britain, much less Europe, the extent of the bibliography alone, comprising some 1400 references, is an indicator that this is a detailed study, dealing with a diverse variety of geographical regions, themes, approaches and explanations related to the Neolithisation process. Fundamentally, this book represents a critical overview of

the diverse narratives and empirical data used to explain the complex process of transformations from predominantly hunting and gathering to predominantly farming lifeways in Britain and Europe.

Chapters 1–4, dealing with Neolithisation in different parts of Europe are, as the author suggests, intended to present the “*progressive transformations*” of the Neolithic through time, the diversity of Neolithic societies across Europe and provide “... *comparative case studies against which the British evidence can be set*” (p. 7). In the first three chapters, the author comments on a wide variety of empirical evidence and presents his own explanations of the data, starting with the Franchthi cave in Greece and progressing through the continent to the megalithic monuments of Brittany. In chapter 4, the author presents “... *unifying themes that characterized the opening of the Neolithic in various parts of Europe*” (p. 101) starting with an overview of how the Neolithic was and is defined and Neolithisation conceptualised, then focusing on the different perspectives of migrationism and genetic evidence, the transmission of knowledge and skills, Mesolithic lifeways, the ‘Neolithic frontier’, subsistence strategies and feasting, houses and ‘house societies’ *etc.* In chapter 5, the author focuses exclusively on Britain with a ‘critical historiography’ in which he reviews the history of research of the British Neolithic, beginning with Sir John Lubbock, and considers the work of major authorities on the subject: Childe, Pigott, Hawkes, Clark, Humphrey, Whittle, Dennell, Kinnes, Hodder and, reflectively, himself. He then comments extensively on the migrationist and diffusionist arguments of Cooney, Sheridan and Rowley-Conwy, whom he labels ‘revisionists’. Chapter 6 sets the stage for the rest of the book by presenting the evidence of Mesolithic lifeways. In the earlier part of chapter 7, the author dedicates a lot of attention to the results of the Bayesian modeling approach to ¹⁴C calendar chronologies (Whittle A., Healy F. & Bayliss A. 2011. *Gathering time: dating the Early Neolithic enclosures of Southern Britain and Ireland*, cited in the Bibliography) and reviews the dating evidence from early British Neolithic sites. The rest of the book, constituting roughly one third of the

whole volume, comprises a detailed consideration of the empirical evidence and ideas about a range of themes, starting with contact, interaction and seafaring in chapter 8, followed by architecture (halls, houses, timber structures, long mounds and megaliths), portable artefacts (ceramics, stone tools), landscapes, plant and animal remains. Of special notice here is the hypothesis that “... livestock in general, and cattle in particular, may have been one of the principal factors that attracted hunters and gatherers to the Neolithic way of life” (p. 430). “The formation of more bounded social groups accumulating discrete herds of cattle suggests an increasingly competitive social milieu”, which expressed itself in “feasting, gift-giving, strategic marriages, and the struggle for prestige”, but also in “inter-personal violence ... linked to the emergence of endemic raiding, acquiring livestock and labour by foul means as well as fair” (p. 418). Cattle can thus be regarded as Neolithic ‘social capital’. Considering the emphasis on practices related to cattle herding, this book would benefit from more discussion of lipid analyses and dairying (e.g., the work of Richard P. Evershed, Mark S. Copley and Lucy J. E. Cramp).

Innovative ideas and novel explanations of the empirical evidence from Europe and Britain can be found in every chapter, and it would not be fair to isolate a one in particular here. Generally, the explanations can be characterised as coming predominantly from a well-argued, indigenist neolithisation perspective, although the author specifically denies his is an ‘indigenist’ (p. 419), and it is true that he presents a balanced and well-argued account in which the distinction between ‘indigenist’ and ‘migrationist’ perspectives cease to be valid. The overall picture this narrative presents is of a “mosaic” of different lifeways in which various social entities, such as the “LBK social network” (p. 47), or different identities are conceived as permeable and fluid concepts. We notice a very pragmatic use of social-theory-informed archaeology, so that the text is not overburdened with philosophical discussions. Actually, there are almost no references to philosophical, sociological or anthropological works. Certain narrative elements bear a resemblance to an archaeological ‘school of thought’ which could be called ‘Symmetrical’ or ‘Relational’ archaeology: “... while Neolithic societies in Europe were extremely diverse, they were generally characterized by a new kind of relationship between humans and non-humans ... Although post-glacial hunters had been deeply embedded in and attuned to their ma-

terial world, there was a qualitative difference in the ways in which Neolithic people used material things to articulate social relationships, to extend human presence, and to frame and channel social interaction. We might say that while Mesolithic societies were principally composed of relationships amongst people, and that they operated in worlds of animals and things, Neolithic societies became heterogeneous meshworks in which people, things, and animals were mutually implicated to a greater degree” (p. 421–422). This passage perhaps best illustrates the way in which neolithisation is explained in the book.

Interestingly, books dealing with neolithisation, and this one is no exception, usually review only the earliest Neolithic evidence in individual regions, even if on an widening geographical scale, this means considering evidence separated by several millennia. Neolithisation, or the transformation from hunter-gatherer to farmer’s lifeways, is therefore seen as a universal global phenomenon, which it certainly is, and is approached from a comparative perspective. However, much could be gained also from a more ‘historical’ consideration of roughly contemporary evidence. In this book, for instance, there could be more consideration of the circular enclosures of the Lengyel, Stroked Pottery, Michelsberg, Chasséen, Funnel Beaker and other cultures, some of which are contemporary with the early British Neolithic and are sometimes seen as precursors to the early Neolithic enclosures in Britain. Furthermore, this book adheres to the conventional model of European neolithisation, at least in the structure of the first few chapters, beginning in Greece and ending in Britain. In his review of the book, Detlef Gronenborn (*Antiquity* 88(341) 2014: 989–990) notices the lack of consideration of recent archaeogenetic research, which he says, “... may demonstrate a hesitance within British Neolithic archaeology to accept the growing evidence which indicates that, for several millennia, some regions of Europe experienced major population changes”. Rather than focusing on the still sketchy and interspersed archaeogenetic evidence, some of which is nevertheless presented in the book (p. 109–113), we would rather focus on a different issue, related perhaps to Gronenborn’s observation cited above. While we personally applaud the enthusiasm with which Thomas writes about the Gathering Time project of Alasdair Whittle and his colleagues and agree with its impact on the “post-Gathering Time era of Neolithic studies” (p. 3), we noticed a comparable lack of consideration of other, perhaps no less revolution-

nary approaches to Neolithic studies. For example, no mention is made of the recent work by Stephen Shennan and his team at University College London (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/euroevol>) dealing with the Neolithic from a more demographic and cultural evolutionary perspective and pointing to links between population fluctuations and cultural change. We could characterise Gathering Time as a bottom-up approach and the EUROEVOL project as a top-down approach in the utilisation of ^{14}C data and ultimately in Neolithic studies. However, both kinds of approach are needed, we think, if we are to understand the complex process of neolithisation from a multiscalar perspective. Furthermore, there is a lack in the book of at least a comment or a critique of the research on the impact of climate changes on the demographics and lifeways of Neolithic commu-

nities, mainly in continental Europe (Bernhard We-
ninger and others, also Detlef Gronenborn) but also
Britain (e.g., *Bonsall C. et al. 2002. Climate change
and the adoption of agriculture in north-west Eu-
rope*, cited in the Bibliography).

There is no question, however, that the Birth of Neo-
lithic Britain is a big step forward in understanding
the transformations from hunting/gathering to farm-
ing regionally, continentally and globally. It repre-
sents a holistic synthesis of the current understand-
ing of the neolithisation process in Britain and
should be on the bookshelf of every student and re-
searcher interested not only in the British but the
European Neolithic as well.

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