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Book Reviews

THE NEOLITHISATION OF IRAN: THE FORMATION OF NEW SOCIETIES. THEMES FROM THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST EDITED BY R J MATTHEWS AND F NASHLI


The edited volume under review here has grown from a lively session on Iran in the Neolithic that the editors had convened at the 7th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East (ICAANE) conference in London in 2010. It offers a seminal update on the current status of research into the Iranian Neolithic 25 years after the publication of the last synthesis (Hole 1987), which had appeared at a moment when the country had shut down to archaeological research in the wake of the 1979 revolution and the ensuing Iran-Iraq war. This break has lead by necessity also to a gap in perception by the academic discipline, and the role that the Eastern Fertile Crescent played in the process of neolithisation has therefore remained largely obscure. In consequence, subsequent theoretical modelling has tended to neglect the region or has relegated it to an area of retarded and secondary neolithisation (Aurenche and Kozlowski 2001, 37). The new research presented in this edited volume therefore presents a first and highly important step to resurrect this distorted perception.

The book is organized in 18 chapters in geographical order. Following a theoretically informed introduction by the editors, most individual chapters present new evidence from the western Zagros region, Fars, the Central Plateau, north eastern Iran plus two isolated cases from the Northwest and Southeast of Iran. Some of the highly stimulating lectures at the London session could unfortunately not be included; instead, a number of papers by scholars who had not been present in London have been added. The scope and perspectives of the individual chapters vary, and I will restrict myself here to some general comments rather than a discussion of individual papers.

As indicated in the introductory chapter by Matthews and Fazeli, the discipline underwent important shifts in conception and methodology during the 30+ year gap in research into the Iranian Neolithic. In contrast to earlier concepts that defined the Neolithic in terms of technological or economic stages, new approaches emphasized local patterns of continuity and interpret “becoming neolithic” as a continuous social process without a clear beginning and end; they also point out the important advances in archaeological methodology, especially the integration of all kinds of archaeological science into the research process, that allow us today to reconstruct more fine-grained and differentiated models of ancient societies and advocate the consistent application of these new methods to all on-going research. Of uttermost importance is the creation of an independent 14C-chronology, a task already partly underway largely to the efforts of H. Fazeli and his colleagues (Pollard et al., 2012: 2013); the re-dating of old collections has helped greatly to redress the impression of a delayed beginning of the Neolithic in the eastern Fertile Crescent (Hole 2000), and new data included in this volume contribute to this picture.
Chapters 2-6 are dedicated to new research in the Western Zagros region; of these, Chapter 2 (R. Matthews et al.) presents research questions and initial results of the CZAP (Central Zagros Archaeological Project) project's excavations at Sheikh-e Abad and Jani which are now also published as a monograph (Matthews et al., 2013); Chapters 3 (Niknami et al.) and 4 (Alibaigi) offer evidence from surveys in the Kermanshah region; Chapters 5 (Darabi et al.) and 6 (Conard et al.) introduce two new sites, East Chia Sabz in the Seimarreh Valley of Lorestan and Chogha Golan in the Posht-e Kuh; both sites cover the crucial transition from the Epipalaeolithic to the Neolithic period, and Chogha Golan furthermore is now the first to yield a dated botanical sequence that allows the local processes of cereal gathering and storing that eventually lead to domestication in this region to be traced for the first time (Riehl et al., 2013).

A local continuity in cultural developments can by now also be postulated for the south Iranian region of Fars. Investigations in the Bolaghi Valley (Chapter 7, Tsuneki) and at Rahmatabad (Chapter 9, Azizi Kharanaghi et al.) both point at occupations predating the ceramic neolithic; the so-called “proto-neolithic” in the Bolaghi caves and in Arsenjan represents phases so far unknown in Fars that fill the gap between the Upper Palaeolithic and the Neolithic; and the so-called “aceramic neolithic” in Rahmatabad extends the neolithic occupation backwards. The synthetical review by Weeks (Chapter 8) puts these data into a larger perspective and points out avenues of future research: how can the still existing gap in our knowledge between the Upper Palaeolithic and the ceramic Neolithic be investigated and explained? And what are non-economic definitions for the Neolithic? And when and how does it all end – or is it a drawn-out process without a proper ending?

Three of the four chapters (10-13) that treat the developments on the Iranian Central Plateau have grown out of research undertaken for more than a decade by H. Fazeli and his colleagues on the western plateau and around the site of Tepe Sialk. Excavation results from Sialk North and radiocarbon dates (Chapter 10, Fazeli Nashli et al.), an overview on animal usage (Chapter 12, Young & Fazeli) and results of geoarchaeological research undertaken around Sialk (Chapter 13, Kourampas et al.) all point to the beginning of sedentary life in the region after 6000 BCE only, characterised by few sedentary occupations of the ceramic neolithic; pastoral lifestyle and specialized herding are evident, leading to changes in the environment that must be considered anthropogenic. To the complex data gathered around Sialk there is also a report on the key Tepe Khaleseh excavations (Chapter 11, Valipour et al.).

Chapters 14 and 15 examine the Neolithic in northeastern Iran, where the site of Tappe Sang-e Chaqmagh excavated in the 1970s by a Japanese team has for so long remained the only known neolithic site in the region. The publication of an English translation of the previously still unpublished Japanese report on Sang-e Chaqmagh (Chapter 14, Masuda et al.) is of high importance, as these data have never been fully accessible to an Anglo- (or Irano-) phone audience. In his subsequent discussion of this evidence from an up-to-date perspective, Thornton (Chapter 15) points out the various supra-regional correlations of the Sang-e Chaqmagh sites, including possible relations with the Central Asian Neolithic as it is known today. New data from the site of Pookerdval (Chapter 16, Yousefi Zoshkh & Zeighami) finally adds welcome new information to the so-far isolated case of Sang-e Chaqmagh.

The last two chapters seem rather isolated: Chapter 17 (Vahdati Nasab et al.) presents a sequence from the rock shelter site Rashak III in the northern Alborz that seems to have been occupied intermittently during the late Neolithic. The painted ceramics found there appear without known comparisons beyond a general link to the painted Hajji Firuz wares; they seem to exhibit some similarity with painted neolithic material recently discovered in the Mil Steppe in Azerbaijan Republic (Aliyev and Helwing, 2009), a material certainly also connected to the Hajji Firuz Late Neolithic occupation.
Lastly, Chapter 18 (Gharazhian & Shakooei) presents the site of Tal-e Atashi in the southeast Iranian Lut Desert not far from Bam, and area where, to date, no Neolithic occupation has been known. The site appears as a large mound with a stratigraphic sequence of mudbrick architecture dated to the 6th millennium BCE. Excellent organic preservation and the fact that the site appears (despite its late date) not to have used ceramics are noteworthy.

With all the new evidence presented, one thing is most obvious: we are only at the very beginning of understanding the Neolithic in Iran; complete regions and phases remain unknown, and the archaeological map is far from complete. Despite the sparse coverage, however, some important aspects deserve special attention and signpost perspectives for future research agendas.

First, it is by now fully acceptable that the eastern wing of the Fertile Crescent played an important role in the formation of Neolithic ways of life; other than previously thought (cf Cauvin, Aurenche and Kozlowski 1999), the Zagros valleys which have been inhabited since the Upper Palaeolithic by communities who interacted with their environment to such a degree that local processes leading to domestication of cereals and probably animals thrived; hence, we should no longer consider the Zagros Mountains as an area of secondary Neolithisation, as the long-standing “Levantine primacy” model had supposed.

Second, the presence of proto-neolithic and aceramic neolithic settlements indicates local continuities of cultural developments since the Upper Palaeolithic and corroborates the notion that local processes must be taken much more into consideration.

Third, the lack of data remains a problem for any further interpretation of the data; understanding how representative the archaeological record is requires systematic investigations of landscape formation processes, an avenue little explored in Iran so far.

Fourth, given all the uncertainties in the current state of research, some questions will require reconsideration: this applies especially to the role that northeastern Iran played in the formation of Neolithic lifeways; for us to consider how much did regions like Damghan and sites like Sang-e Chaqmagh owe to developments that took place further northeast, in the oases along the foot of the Kopet Dagh and beyond?

Bringing together all this disparate evidence was certainly a huge task, and was carried out carefully by the editors. The volume that has grown out of this admirable effort puts Iran back on the agenda of research, after decades of standstill, and points out wide avenues of future work. We can only hope for similar collaborative efforts in the future and the volume here is certainly a good start.

References


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