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The world reshaped: practices and impacts of early agrarian societies

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Abstract

The contributions in this volume indicate that research into the study of early agriculture continues to remain a flourishing area of science. We discuss the contribution of the volume's papers and provide a review of how they add to our knowledge about the process to early agriculture, its development and impacts upon the Holocene landscape. The main focus of many of the papers is on the European Neolithic record, with several contributions focusing on research from other regions. Our understanding of the processes happening in Europe is deepening to a level where we have a relatively good understanding of events at a regional level and moving towards understanding at a continental level. This contrasts with other areas of the world where there is still considerable need for intensive primary data collection and where the narrative of agricultural subsistence practices varies considerably. In some regions, existing models of understanding may not be fully adequate and the process of "agriculture" in these areas was likely substantially different to how this occurred in Europe and the Near East. Indeed, it is clear that a more nuanced understanding of how we currently define 'agriculture' is necessary. This recognises the diversity of agricultural practises that are evident in different areas of the world, which may be quite removed to what might be recognisable as 'agriculture' in places such as Europe.

It is evident that the switch from hunter-gatherer subsistence to agro-pastoralism had a huge effect on the Earth system, impacting biodiversity, land cover and the global carbon cycle. Archaeologists have much to contribute towards our knowledge of these impacts and the development of the modern 'cultural landscape'.

Keywords: Neolithic; agricultural transitions; human-environment interactions; integration of archaeology and palaeoecology; cultural landscapes; sustainable agriculture.

Introduction

This volume of 20 papers emanates from two sessions that were run at the INQUA Bern Congress, in July 2011. The first session was convened by Walter Doerfler, Ingo Feeser, Wiebke Kirleis, Mara Weinelt (Graduate School of Human Development and Landscapes and Institute of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Archaeology, Kiel University), and Felix Bittman (Lower Saxonian Institute for Historic Coastal Research, Wilhelmshaven) entitled '*Climate, Environment and Economy in the north and central European Neolithic*', whilst the second was organised by Nicki Whitehouse, Chris Hunt (then Palaeoecology Centre, Queen's University Belfast), Rob Marchant (Dept of the Environment, University of York), and Carsten Lemmen

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