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Quaternary International

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/quaint

The Neolithic expansion in the Western Mediterranean: Understanding a global phenomenon from regional perspectives



This volume sets out to offer the reader an overview of the neolithization process, the origin of the so-called Cardial Ware early Neolithic, in the Western Mediterranean between the last centuries of the seventh millennium and the mid-sixth millennium BC. The initial idea of the coordinators was to bring together a number of researchers of known international prestige, with a long and proven scientific career in that field, who would explain the work that has been carried out or is in progress in that area of the Mediterranean. To maintain certain standardization in the way the information was approached, some thematic guidelines were suggested so that the data from the different regions might be compared more easily. With these regional models, the intention was to obtain a full picture of the patterns and timing of the introduction of the Neolithic economy as well as the interactions between hunter-gatherer groups and neighboring farming communities, taking into account any regional peculiarities. In this way, it might be possible to move on from more traditional debates focused on chrono-cultural aspects. Even if most of papers deal with the origins of the Neolithic from a regional perspective, some other papers show a more global approach, whereas some authors have paid special attention to the cultural interactions between the Western Mediterranean and neighboring areas. Finally, other studies offer a view of the development of economic practices and subsistence habits from a more cross-cutting perspective.

Although the geographic setting initially aimed to cover the central Mediterranean with its respective northern and southern shores, some areas could not be included in this volume for various reasons. This is largely due to the recent special issue of Quaternary International (No. 320 coordinated by David Lubell) on North Africa, *Northwest African prehistory: Recent work, new results and interpretations*, as some studies might have been repeated. Despite this, we believe that thematic and geographic unity has been achieved, with studies of great relevance and whose results may in any case be compared with those from North Africa published in the above-mentioned issue.

Consequently, the present monograph presents a general picture of the neolithization process in much of the Mediterranean, while also demonstrating some differences in the treatment of the archaeological record, indicating the unique elements in each area and the aspects that need studying in greater depth, thus pointing the way for future research. We think that this kind of monograph is necessary because archaeologists often concentrate their research in a particular place, which means that they do not possess a wider perspective of the situation in other areas. It also occurs that some readers wish to perceive an overview that does not exist and therefore have to search for specific

literature published in each country. With this type of monograph we aim to provide a general picture of the neolithization process in the Mediterranean through 18 papers which also list a large number of references enabling access to more detailed information about the areas taken into account. Their publication in a journal with a proven scientific track record ensures their wide international dissemination.

Reading the different contributions prompts a number of reflections. The Neolithic is a period that in recent years has generated a huge amount of information, which shows that this was a complex process in which it is impossible to construct a single homogeneous model and solution. This is confirmed by the data, not only from the excavation of new sites or the reappraisal of old ones, but also from the studies that have recently been introduced in archaeology, such as isotope and genetic analysis. However, it is equally true that these results must be supported by solid scientific research of the archaeological sites, with rigorous stratigraphic studies, chronometric analyses, climate proxies, reconstructions of economic strategies, etc.

All these aspects appear in the contributions of the different authors of the papers in this monograph. They have made an enormous effort to summarize decades of research in a few pages, to explain the different interpretations that have been proposed in the areas in which they work and bring together information from countless sites that have been excavated, the ever-increasing number of absolute dates and the different types of analysis that have been applied to the archaeological assemblages. This is a huge task, hard to carry out, integrate and summarize, as it is much easier to describe the sites or materials that one knows best or that one normally works with. Therefore, we would like to thank all the authors for their commitment and for the magnificent studies they have presented. The volume in general and their papers in particular will undoubtedly be a point of reference for new research and generations who come to address such an exciting topic as the transition between the last Mesolithic hunter-gatherer groups and the first Neolithic farming communities.

The papers in this issue are basically in geographic order. Following a general introduction, the different regional studies are arranged from east to west, while the papers with a more cross-cutting approach are left until the end. The following lines present a short introduction to each of the contributions in this volume.

Guilaine explains the emergence of the groups with Impressed Ware in the Italo-Adriatic region, some of whom spread the Neolithic package as far as the Iberian Peninsula with a seaborne movement of pioneer settlement. He hypothesizes about the emergence of the subsequent Cardial culture according to a model of coalescence by

maritime interactions between the Neolithic settlements. These Neolithic groups most probably interacted with local hunter-gatherers, though it is difficult to demonstrate situations of “face-to face” contact between the two types of populations.

Ibáñez et al. combine a detailed account of current knowledge of the neolithization process in the Fertile Crescent with proposals of interpretation originating out of the multiple studies performed in that vast region. Their paper explains the hypotheses that have been put forward about such fundamental topics as animal and plant domestication, the shape of houses, the technical lithic reduction systems, the importance of inter-group relationships and the significance of all aspects of the symbolic world seen through mortuary practices and artistic representations. The authors envisage a much more complex neolithization process in its core area than was supposed until quite recently.

Natali and Forgia focus on South Italy, the area that bears the earliest evidence for the arrival of farming communities in the Italian Peninsula. The authors pay particular attention to the very first phase of the neolithization process, including a review of the available Mesolithic evidence. The process of neolithization in Southern Italy and Sicily covers about 500 years (6200–5700 cal BC) and involves two cultural horizons: Archaic Impressed Ware and Advanced Impressed Ware. The first period is characterized by a general homogeneity until at least 5800 cal BC, whereas during the Advanced Impressed Ware phase the appearance of regionally distributed features suggests a more fragmentary cultural landscape. In addition, while in South Italy (Apulia, Basilicata and Calabria regions) the arrival of Neolithic communities from the East is characterized by a package of fully domesticated plants and animals, in Sicily the adoption of the new economic system is apparently slower and with no clear ruptures with the local Mesolithic groups.

Radi and Petrinelli approach the neolithization of Central Italy. The arrival of the first farming communities in the central sector of the Italian Peninsula is most likely a consequence of the diffusion of the Neolithic communities settled in South Italy. Nevertheless, the authors highlight the complexity of this phenomenon, which saw different diffusion routes (inland, coastal and maritime routes), from different origins. In addition, the authors provide a complete overview of both the middle-Tyrrhenian and middle-Adriatic provinces, suggesting a strong dichotomy between the two areas. Available data for middle-Tyrrhenian regions is much scarcer; however, the analysis of material culture, especially of pottery decoration styles (i.e. decorative layouts, presence/absence of specific motifs like the rocker and anthropomorphic protomes), reveals some divergences with the Adriatic side, since the early phases of the Neolithic. This initial dichotomy would be further accentuated in the successive periods, also given the arrival of influences and people from the Po Plain, via the Apennines.

Lugliè deals with the first human settlement in Sardinia and Corsica which was marked by a sharp discontinuity between Mesolithic and Neolithic lifeways and strategies of adaptation. Corsica and Sardinia, were likely reached by the first scouting pioneers around 5800 cal BC, while the first farmers populated both islands from about 5600 year cal BC, probably sailing along the prevalent north-southwards drift and in several waves. From that moment a dramatic turnover in the faunal and botanical complex of the islands occurred, because of the impact on the environment of the first farming activities. The Neolithic occupation of the islands was accompanied by the exploitation and circulation of obsidian lithic resources.

Starnini et al. provide an overview of the first farming communities that settled in North Italy, and specifically in the Po Plain. The neolithization of the Po Plain is clearly an intrusive phenomenon, whose roots are most probably to be searched along the central Italian Adriatic coastline and its neighboring territories. Nevertheless, the cultural setting of this region is fairly complex, with a patchwork of cultural entities (Impressa, Isolino, Vhò, Fiorano, Gaban, Fagnigola, etc.), whose origins are not fully understood. A Late Mesolithic role

within this process is still debated, but evidence of Castelnovian occupations in the Po Plain is far too poor, since most of the sites are represented by small surface collections of finds. The new series of radiocarbon dates allow the chronology of the North Italian Neolithic to be refined, suggesting that the neolithization process in the area took place during the last centuries of the 6th millennium.

Perrin et al. present an overview of the neolithization of southwest France, including data from new, ongoing excavations and a revision of earlier research. A large dataset on the Late Mesolithic and the Neolithic in the region concerned is presented, clarifying the chronology and the dynamics of the neolithization process. Up to four different stages can be identified: 1) the implantation of small seafaring groups of eastern origin; 2) the development of the Cardial complex and the expansion of the farmers groups into new ecosystems; 3) a consolidation phase, which saw an increasing exploitation of the mountain areas and 4) a final phase in which long distance interactions seem to emerge more clearly. Alongside this expansion process, some of the technical and cultural aspects of these societies appear to be changing, re-composing the Neolithic package by adopting innovations from neighboring areas and developing original cultural and economic systems.

Willigen presents a key work to understand the neolithization process in regions linked with LBK (linearbandkeramik) cultural traditions. The author makes an initial brief but detailed description of current knowledge of those cultural manifestations located between the Mediterranean and Central Europe, known particularly by such pottery types as LBK, cardial and impressa ware. Then the author assesses the elements that connect Mesolithic and Neolithic societies, and the contacts between LBK and cardial groups. This research undoubtedly provokes many reflections on the networks connecting different communities that lived in the same areas or in neighboring regions.

García-Martínez de Lagrán et al. reappraise the paleogenetic data available for the early Neolithic in the Iberian Peninsula and their implications in the neolithization process, by taking special care in linking those data with the archaeological record. The data demonstrate the existence of a colonization phenomenon associated with the process, not without some mixing with the local hunter-gatherer populations. However, precise quantification of paleo-mesolithic DNA is difficult, due to the unequal representation of individuals assignable to both periods and evidence of nuclear DNA is scarce. Despite the lack of information, the data suggest that Iberia saw the confluence and arrival of different waves of neolithisation, as the study of the material products of those populations seems to confirm.

Peña-Chocarro et al. show that, starting from 5500 BC, early farmers in the Iberian Peninsula cultivated seven different cereal taxa – hulled wheat (einkorn, emmer, and the “new” glume wheat), free threshing wheat (hard and bread wheat) and barley (hulled and naked types) - and seven legumes (pea, broad bean, lentil, grass/red pea, bitter vetch and common vetch). Flax and poppy were also part of the list of Neolithic domesticates. This wealth of resources was combined in different ways that varied from region to region. The causes of such regionalisation are still open to debate, though environmental, economic, social and cultural factors could be behind this variability in specific crop choices.

Oms et al. update the phenomena associated with the neolithization process in the northeast of the Iberian Peninsula, showing that the first evidence of Neolithic communities is then documented after a hiatus of information on Mesolithic groups of about 500 years (c. 6000–5500 cal BC). The Neolithic communities initially settled in littoral and pre-littoral zones, although by c. 5300 cal BC they had occupied the rest of northeast Iberia, including high mountain regions. As in other areas of the Western Mediterranean, from the start, these groups shared a consolidated agricultural economy even though specific differences in the strategies of acquisition of subsistence resources are attested in different areas of this region.

Rojo-Guerra et al. explain the spread of Neolithic across the Ebro

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