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## Ecologies of fiber-work: Animal technologies and invisible craft practices in prehistoric Southwest Asia

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### ABSTRACT

Direct evidence for the use of plant and fiber technologies is rare in prehistoric Southwest Asia. The inferred existence of such technologies is made through the analysis of microwear traces on animal bone objects, impressions of long-perished objects in soils and clay, phytolith remains, and the pioneering techniques of archaeoethnatology used in the taphonomic study of mortuary/burial practices. This article discusses the range of invisible craft practices brought to light via these methods and suggests that they can be used to write small-scale microhistories that have interpretive value quite aside from current overarching narratives about the Epipalaeolithic and Early Neolithic periods in the region.

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Note: The following general chronology is used (after [Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen, 2011](#), S196, Table 1), although there are often regional overlaps, variations and contradictions from one publication to another: Early Epipalaeolithic: ca. 24 000–18 900 cal BP; Middle Epipalaeolithic: 18 000–14 400 cal BP; Late Epipalaeolithic: 14 900–11 750 cal BP; Early Neolithic (PPNA): 12 175–11 000 cal BP; Early Neolithic (PPNB): 10 950–8900 cal BP.

### 1. Introduction

In this article I want to make the case that small everyday things matter. We often say that archaeology is concerned with the practices of everyday life, but in reality the writings of the discipline are still dominated by narratives of large-scale processes and archaeologically imagined social totalities. In the case of the Epipalaeolithic and Early Neolithic of Southwest Asia, the big stories continue to be those relating to the shift from a hunter-gatherer

existence to a settled way of life based on a farming economy. Concomitant changes in mobility and residential patterns (sedentism), and social organization, and the biological processes of plant and animal domestication loom large. These are stories that refer to “origins”, “revolutions” and “transitions”, and to “cultures” and “entities”. The Late Epipalaeolithic Natufian has even been labeled a “revolutionary cultural entity” ([Grosman et al., 2008:17668](#)). These are obviously important stories, telling us about those large-scale changes that underpin the grand narratives of human history, but they are often told in ways that mask other narratives: stories of small things – microhistories – about the intimate relationships between humans, nonhuman animals, plants, and the materials that make up the ecologies of everyday life, of existence. By ecologies, I refer not only to geological-timescale environmental and climatic conditions, or to the fluxing ecosystems as defined by the biological sciences, but primarily to the everyday encounters and interactions of coexistence that take place between people, animals, plants and materials (including artifacts) within particular historical conditions and social geographies. Microhistories of such encounters offer interpretations of humans, nonhumans and materials that may or may not have anything to do with larger-scale socioeconomic processes (e.g. ‘neolithization’), and certainly have little to do with events thousands of years in the future that people

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could never have imagined (see Fig. 1).

As a way into telling such microhistories, I here identify intimate material connections between practices involving animal bone technologies and plant/fiber technologies. I aim to demonstrate how, during the Epipalaeolithic and Early Neolithic periods in the different landscapes of southwestern Asia, histories of daily life and everyday human experience were built through the practical engagement of human and nonhuman relationships within an ecological scheme. It is the processes which maintained, reproduced and transformed themselves and that scheme that I wish to investigate, rather than considering the transformation of one form

of socioeconomic system into another - the traditional and still dominant “Neolithic narrative”.

### 1.1. Neolithic narrative origins

We can trace the origins of the Neolithic narrative to the European-dominated prehistory of early 20th century Palestine. Peake and Fleure (1927) suggested a western Asian origin for agriculture, focused specifically to the Levant by Gordon Childe (1934). Excavations by the British archaeologist Dorothy Garrod in the caves of the Judean Hills and Mount Carmel in Palestine from

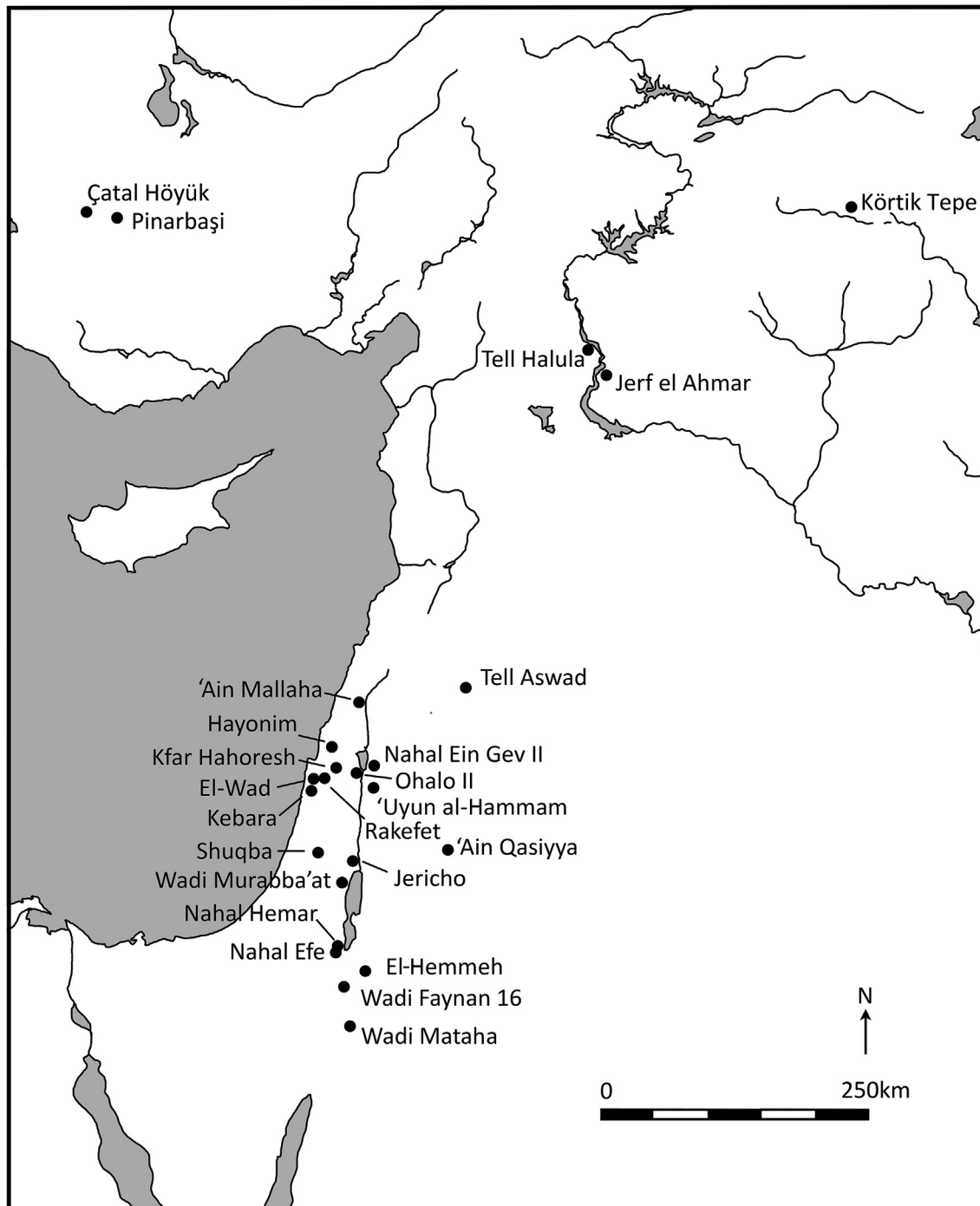


Fig. 1. Map of sites mentioned in text.

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