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*Review of Changing Natures: Hunter-Gatherers, First
Farmers and the Modern World*

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Published Version. *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 116, No. 1 (January 2012). DOI:[10.3764/
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Changing Natures: Hunter-Gatherers, First Farmers and the Modern World

Jane Peterson

By Bill Finlayson and Graeme M. Warren (*Duckworth Debates in Archaeology*). Pp. 144, figs. 15. Duckworth, London 2010. €12.99. ISBN 978-0-7156-3813-2 (paper).

This slim volume is part of the *Duckworth Debates in Archaeology* series. The theme of the series is to introduce both students and serious scholars to a contemporary debate in archaeology. The debate presented here coalesces around what types of explanatory frameworks are best suited to understanding the Neolithic Revolution. Finlayson and Warren provide a provocative exegesis of the generalizing and synthetic narratives archaeologists commonly deploy to describe the transitions from hunter-gatherer to first farmer and beyond. The authors unpack the standard origin models by examining implicit assumptions, historical and theoretical influences, and relevant ethnographic and archaeological data. In doing so, they promote theoretical approaches that emphasize local variation and community-level analyses. This call for an interpretive shift is consistent with broader trends in archaeology and across the social sciences that increasingly stress human agency, practice, and historical contingency at the expense of evolutionary models.

The book is organized into six chapters, with a short preface. Several recurrent themes are interwoven throughout the text. The authors emphasize the historical developments and influences of the standard classificatory categories of “hunter-gatherer” and “Neolithic farmer.” They argue that archaeologists have generally been complicit in applying these concepts uncritically to prehistoric groups. This results in the perpetuation of biased and politically charged narratives of revolutionary change and hampers our ability to conceptualize the transition in meaningful ways. Extended examples from the authors’ areas of geographic expertise, the southern Levant of southwest Asia (Finlayson) and western Europe (Warren), are interspersed as case studies. References are used more sparingly than in many scholarly works, which enhances the flow and development of the argument. This is especially welcome for students interested in engaging with a complex theoretical debate who are often, in my experience, overwhelmed by citations.

The authors claim that many of the existing models for the origins of agriculture succumb to the seductive, yet inaccurate, metaphor of a linear, progressive cultural development. Human groups are often depicted as marching in syncopation from their hunter-gatherer origins to the early village farmers who paved the way for the current shape and structure of our modern lives. The authors highlight some of the problems inherent with stereotypical views of hunter-gatherers and first farmers in chapters 1 and 2. For example, while ethnographers tend to view hunter-gatherer societies as extremely diverse and flexible in terms of subsistence practices, social organization, mobility patterns, and the like, archaeologists have used the term in more reductive ways, encoding “hunter-gatherer” as an origin point for subsequent cultural developments. The authors issue a valuable reminder that hunter-gatherer systems are neither simple nor lacking in structure. Elaborate social mechanisms and kinship systems keep these societies in balance. To view them as a social “ground zero” from whence all economic and social complexity emerge is both inaccurate and historically rooted in racist sensibilities.

Empirically, the archaeological record provides numerous examples that also challenge the notion of a

linear, progressive development. Detailed examples from southwest Asia and Europe are provided in chapters 3–5. The Epipaleolithic groups in southwest Asia, known as Natufian, are discussed in some detail. Numerous data sets document that Early Natufian groups (ca. 12,500–11,500 B.C.E.) have two essential hallmarks that situate them on the cusp of agriculture (preadapted, if you will): (1) increased sedentism and (2) increased use of plant foods, specifically cereals. After 11,500 B.C.E., however, the logical, linear progression to village farming does not materialize. Instead, during the subsequent Late Natufian (11,500–10,000 B.C.E.), populations appear to disperse into sites that are smaller and less permanent. Other examples in the text challenge a unidirectional, inexorable march toward farming. The authors spend considerable time discussing the generally ahistorical treatment of both prehistoric and modern hunter-gatherer groups.

The archaeological treatment of early farming groups has also been encumbered by a series of progress-laden assumptions that bear closer scrutiny. Neolithic farmers are characteristically viewed as living in increasingly large and complex settlements. These nucleated sites present novel social challenges. How, for example, does one forge a sense of order and community among larger and more diverse populations? A common scholarly argument sees increased social differentiation and hierarchical decision-making structures as predestined outcomes that emerge to manage the new realities of food-production systems. Here, again, the authors contest this narrative by looking at the archaeological record. In southwest Asia, large, nucleated settlements, referred to as megasites by some, occur in the Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (LPPN-B) period (ca. 8,000–7,700 B.C.E.). They would seem ideal candidates to support this scenario of nucleation leading to status differentiation. However, closer scrutiny reveals that most of these villages were abandoned at the end of LPPN-B. They did not develop into more complex, protourban places. Furthermore, there is considerable consensus among Near Eastern Neolithic scholars that LPPN-B villagers were working hard to maintain an egalitarian ethos. Architectural, mortuary, and bioarchaeological data sets indicate little evidence for stratification among the roles, residences, and rituals of the period.

Some of the most provocative discussions in the text focus on the extent to which we forge connections between ourselves and the first Neolithic farmers. Evolutionary models have been so influential in part because they reinforce a structural dichotomy that resonates with our modern, western mindset. If, as the authors argue, hunter-gatherers are commonly constructed as wholly “other,” culturally distinctive, and lacking in structure and complexity, Neolithic farmers are, in contrast, constructed as people like us, people we recognize as like ourselves. In the Neolithic mirror, we see families working harder, struggling with reduced social and economic flexibility, and witnessing the beginnings of institutionalized inequality. But we must demonstrate, not assume the degree to which early farming communities experience these changes. The authors warn that to assume a cultural phylogeny that links the Neolithic directly to the modern can be problematic. Chapter 5 examines this issue with specific reference to the symbolic and cognitive realms.

Several influential senior scholars (e.g., Colin Renfrew, Trevor Watkins, Jacques Cauvin) have proposed that the Neolithic mind underwent a cognitive revolution in parallel with the socioeconomic developments associated with new agricultural lifestyles. The hallmarks of the cognitive changes are variously described as the ability to process larger and more complex types of information, engage materially with the world around them in fundamentally new ways (mediated by new symbolic repertoires), and externalize the natural world. Because of these cognitive developments, Neolithic folks are now apparently on an intellectual par with us in some fundamental way that hunters-gatherers were/are not. Like the authors, I suspect many anthropologists find this corollary highly problematic. Archaeologically, invoking a cognitive revolution would seem to improve our ability to

decipher the symbolic content of Neolithic images and artifacts. Yet assuming that Neolithic humanlike figurines are now gods and goddesses or that distinctive architectural features are now sanctuaries and temples because, after all, they are doing religion like we do it now does not really render these interpretations more satisfying.

In chapter 6, the authors recapitulate their main points. First, they do not question that the advent of farming brought about changes that were transformative and, in some places, laid the foundation for increased political and social complexity. But they remind us that broadly synthetic, progressive models for the rise of agriculture reinforce reductive and unreflective assumptions about both hunter-gathers and early farmers. Having convincingly demonstrated that such models often falter in light of local data sets and detailed analyses, Finlayson and Warren advocate bottom-up historical approaches that examine the pace, timing, and directionality of cultural change on a more human scale.

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DOI: 10.3764/ajaonline1161.Peterson