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Egalitarian societies and the earliest Neolithic of Southwest Asia

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Abstract. There is evidence that early Neolithic societies in Southwest Asia promoted egalitarian behavior, through mechanisms such as mortuary practices which concealed individual identity, and sharing of food resources, for example in communal granaries. It has often been assumed that this egalitarian behavior continues traditional hunter-gatherer practices, designed to resist the potential for individual, or household wealth differentiation permitted by innovative food production and storage practices. However, there is little, or no evidence that the preceding Natufian culture was representative of what we identify as a typical hunter-gatherer society. Equality may have been just one of the innovations developed by early Neolithic societies, subsequently replaced in the later Neolithic and the development of a more hierarchical social system.
Keywords: Neolithic, Southwest Asia, egalitarian, sharing, storage.

Финлейсон Б. Эгалитарные общества и ранний неолит Юго-Западной Азии. Имеются данные, что ранненеолитические общества Юго-Западной Азии поощряли эгалитарное поведение, используя для этого, в частности, погребальную обрядность, маскирующую индивидуальные различия, и совместное распределение пищевых ресурсов, которые могли, например, храниться в общественных закромах. Долгое время подразумевалось, что такое эгалитарное поведение продолжает традиционные практики охотников-собирателей, имевшие целью препятствовать появлению имущественного неравенства среди индивидов или домохозяйств, возможности для чего создавали новые способы производства пищи и её хранения. Однако ничто или почти ничто не говорит о том, что предшествовавшая неолиту натуфийская культура представляла собой типичное охотничье-собирательское общество. Равенство могло быть просто одной из инноваций, появившихся в ранненеолитических обществах. В позднем неолите ему на смену пришла более иерархическая социальная система.
Ключевые слова: неолит, Юго-Западная Азия, эгалитаризм, делёж, хранение.

Introduction

The Neolithic of Southwest Asia is widely considered to play a role as a key evolutionary step on the route from hunting and gathering to farming, to urbanism, to state societies, and finally to modern civilization (Barker 2006; Croucher, Campbell 2009). It is assumed that this is a one way, almost targeted process, where various tipping points are reached from which there is no return (Finlayson 2013). In addition to the central subsistence-economy transition, a vital part of the Neolithic process is in the development of social complexity, which appears as both a cause and effect of the Neolithic, with social changes occurring as the result of demographic pressure in increasingly large settled communities (*e. g.* Sterelny, Watkins 2015).

One important social change often associated with the Neolithic has been the emergence of hierarchical societies (Powers, Lehman 2014). Developments such as growing investment in new resources, such as domestic crops, animals, fields, and stored produce, that may have encouraged the growth of concepts of private property, and the need for hierarchical social structures to manage larger population aggregations and collective work projects, have all been understood as pressures requiring new, hierarchical social structures (Benz 2010; Birch 2012). Such hierarchical structures are regarded as a progressive development from the egalitarian societies of hunter-gatherers. The notion that Neolithic society develops from such hunter-gatherer societies is based on a rather uncritical use of ethnographic analogy in Southwest Asian prehistoric archaeology, assuming a universal and timeless correspondence with modern hunter-gatherers, ignoring anthropological literature on the diversity of contemporary hunter-gatherers, and forgetting the thousands of years of arguably complex Natufian society that separates the Neolithic from the most plausible contenders for comparison with modern egalitarian hunter-gatherers. Direct archaeological evidence for hierarchy is however often hard to find (Artemova; Villeneuve, Hayden, this volume).

In this context, not all Neolithic change is interpreted as being progressive, and some have argued for the continuation of aspects of hunter-gatherer behavior into the early Neolithic. This has been perceived in the maintenance of patterns of reciprocal sharing, and in the initial survival of an egalitarian society in the face of the pressure towards hierarchy (Benz 2010), although sharing is hard to identify archaeologically (Honoré 2019; Enloe 2003), and need not equate to egalitarianism (Artemova, this volume). In particular, it has been argued that Pre-Pottery Neolithic B, or PPNB, society tried to maintain an egalitarian form and resist the hierarchical tendencies inherent in larger settlements, using complicated patterns of secondary burials that included the production of plastered skulls to mask individual identity, burial practices that do not contain grave goods to avoid indicating differential wealth or status, and the use of standard domestic architectural forms to confirm household equality (*e. g.* Kuijt 1996; 2004). These early Neolithic behaviors are routinely perceived as final attempts designed to foster egalitarianism and maintain some hunter-gatherer egalitarian ethos from ancestral behavior.

The idea that Neolithic society was simply hanging onto existing egalitarian systems has been bolstered by a traditional conception of hunter-gatherer societies that has not been challenged within Southwest Asian Neolithic archaeological research, and an underlying conception of the Neolithic as progressive and modern (Cauvin 1997; Hodder 2018). This paper will consider the evidence that the Neolithic arose from an egalitarian hunter-gatherer past, and go on to propose that the

archaeological evidence for egalitarianism seen in the earliest Neolithic of the Near East is novel, and perhaps the best early evidence for the emergence of an egalitarian society. Artemova (this volume) has noted that there are no available ethnographic analogues that appear to show any evidence that they might follow the trajectory that led to the Neolithic, intensifying their subsistence or developing farming. They follow their own historical and evolutionary paths, and there is no ethnographic analogy to the Natufian. In a situation with a chronological distance of over 10,000 years, no historical continuity, and very specific technological, economic, and environmental conditions, the Neolithic transition in Southwest Asia fails all the tests that have been proposed for the use of analogy to reconstruct the past (Hodder 1982; Fewster, Zvelebil 2001). This paper will therefore focus on archaeological evidence, working on the basis that the Neolithic transition in Southwest Asia is a non-analogue context, and that ethnographic data cannot be directly employed (Finlayson 2010). Following Ingold, anthropological research will not be used to extract ethnographic data as "empirical material for subsequent interpretation" but to inform "what life *might* or *could* be like, in ways nevertheless grounded in a profound understanding of what life *is* like in particular times and places." (Ingold 2013: 4).

Egalitarian societies

The egalitarian nature of modern hunter-gatherer societies has been assumed to be a primordial, basic state, with systems of inequality only emerging in the recent past (Ames 2007). Egalitarianism is widely assumed to be the default human social state, based largely on the understanding that it is the simple form of social organization associated with 'primitive' hunter-gatherers. Given this default position, an absence of evidence for hierarchy is assumed to confirm egalitarianism, with no requirement to seek positive evidence. When inequality is proposed in early prehistory, the main evidence used is material wealth, and, on this basis, no economic inequality is visible before the Upper Paleolithic (Ames 2010). Even where differential wealth may be evident, as in the Upper Paleolithic burials at Sungir in Russia through the presence of elaborate grave-goods (Trinkaus *et al.* 2014), the lack of comparative burial data means it is impossible to claim that people buried this way had some special status (*cf.* Wengrow, Graeber 2015).

Although most other great ape societies are hierarchical, it has been proposed that human societies are different, for example in caring for group members beyond kin, in sharing property and resources, and in having relatively weak leaders (Boehm 1993; Kuhn, Steiner 2019; Svensson 2009; although see Butovskaya, this volume). This difference has been explained as the result of the increased cognitive capacity of early humans, enhancing their capacity to process social data, which enabled the formation of increasingly large social coalitions, and the formation of egalitarian alliances, where cultural norms favored group interests over the individual. The resulting egalitarian form of hunter-gatherer society proposed would have spread rapidly (Svensson 2009). Care has to be taken in such interpretation, with evidence that patterns of meat sharing in the early Pleistocene reflects hunting of large animals for male prestige and status, not for family provisioning (Hawkes, Bird 2002).

Within the context of this debate, it is important to define what is meant by egalitarianism. Egalitarianism does not refer to a society where everyone is equal. There has never been a society that entirely lacked inequality or dominance. Even within egalitarian societies, differentiation is present, minimally through age or gender, however there are no permanent positions of power, leadership roles are situational, and

power is not transmitted over generations (Peterson, this volume). Typically, egalitarian societies value egalitarian economies, using strong social structures to prevent the accumulation and transmission of wealth, while the societies value generosity, sharing, and reciprocity (Fried 1967). However, it is problematic to simply claim that societies can be egalitarian except with regard to age and gender, as these can be important factors in a stratified hierarchy (Artemova 2016; Gardner 2006). For example, Australian aboriginal men can obtain status by group membership as elders, unlike more egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies elsewhere such as the Mbuti, Hadza, Batek, or the Paliyar (Artemova 2016: 14). Egalitarianism is not strictly determined by the form of subsistence economy, where the differentiation through ceremonial status of Australian aboriginals occurs within immediate return economies, and delayed-return societies in Melanesia show inequality through complex ritual behavior and acceptance of aggrandizers, while other delayed-return economies, such as reindeer herders, may only allow the accumulation of wealth (Artemova 2016). Notably, egalitarian and hierarchical behavior can be manifested within the same societies (Peterson, this volume; Wengrow, Graeber 2015). There are clearly multiple paths to inequality, and we have to consider how individual egalitarian social systems evolved as the result of specific processes (Artemova 2016: 12).

Even within this more nuanced understanding, the underlying assumption that egalitarianism is the original form of human society has been challenged (Boehm 1993; 1999; Diehl 2000; Wengrow, Graeber 2015). Dominance hierarchies are common amongst all African apes and the formation of similar hierarchies may be natural to humans (Boehm 1993; 1999; Henrich, Gil-White 2001). Egalitarianism is therefore not inherent, but is learned behavior, where subdominant and low status individuals combine in alliances to prevent otherwise dominant individuals taking power, a form of behavior that has been observed in chimpanzees (Boehm 1999). Modern hunter-gatherers have to enforce their egalitarian behavior (Woodburn 1982), and maintaining an egalitarian society requires considerable effort through systems of sanctions, rewards and prestige (Ames 2007; Artemova 2016; Erdal, Whiten 1996; Hayden 1995; 1998; 2001; Trigger 2003). The effort requires long-term commitment, egalitarian societies have to stay small, and they may always have been rare (Artemova 2016).

If egalitarianism is not a default state for human societies, it becomes important to question how and when it appears. One possibility is that it was a specific adaptation to the climatic fluctuations of the Pleistocene, where long-term social reciprocity enforced by egalitarian structures was vital to ensure to ensure survival in high-risk environments (Hayden 1981; 2001; Richerson, Boyd 2000). This would suggest egalitarian societies may have existed for as long as 2 million years (Hayden 2001). Alternatively, egalitarian societies may only emerge in the Upper Paleolithic, where modern cognitive capacity provides the moral structures needed to enforce egalitarianism (Ames 2003; 2007). Kuhn and Stiner argue that while persistent places emerge after about 450,000 years ago in the Levant, and may have triggered the encephalization of the brain that led to the ability to empathize and for emotional control, it is only after c 120,000 years ago that 'hearth-centered' base camps become normal, and only after that that evidence of costly social caring emerges (Kuhn, Stiner 2019: 320). In both these scenarios, hierarchical societies would have begun to develop as a consequence of the emergence of food production, population growth, and the more stable environments of the Holocene (Richerson, Boyd 2001; Ames 2007).

Storage arising from food production can enable aggrandizers to accumulate a surplus, and for prestige competitions to develop (Ames 2007; Testart 1982). Delayed return economies that invest labor in food production and require food storage may entail ideas of ownership and private property, an important component of social inequality (Ames 2007). There are two potential routes to social complexity and ranking, the most often recognized being based on individual aggrandizement, where individuals use their social networks to control food, wealth and power (Feinman 2013). However, the opposition between egalitarian and hierarchical, as with the opposition between simple and complex hunter-gatherers, fails to recognize the 'institutional plasticity' of human society, and that egalitarian and hierarchical modes of organization were already open to negotiation and change in the Paleolithic (Wengrow, Graeber 2015). An alternative route to complexity is corporate, based on developing communal ritual, public projects, integrative ritual and ideology, and the suppression of economic differentiation (Feinman 2013). Corporate households have been identified archaeologically by the presence of buildings identified as houses, with these interpreted as corporate households, leading to social complexity and ranking (Ames 2003; Banning, Byrd 1987; Feinman 2013).

In this paper I will suggest that some of the earliest and best evidence we have for the development of an egalitarian society is more recent than previously argued. What is more, it arises just at the point when some previous models have proposed that hierarchical societies might have started to replace earlier egalitarian ones, with the initial development of food-producing economies. For the purposes of this paper, I will consider three potential means where we might be able to archaeologically trace the emergence of egalitarian or hierarchical structures. These are ritual knowledge, that might indicate the presence of ritual or ceremonial status; integrative architecture as a mechanism to enable growing communities to function without developing social hierarchies; and the possible emergence of property as an indicator of differential wealth.

Ritual knowledge

Elaborate ritual knowledge may have emerged in the Upper Paleolithic, with evidence from rich burials and monumental constructions (from 40,000 years ago) giving insights into the complexity of social organization from long before the Neolithic (Wengrow, Graeber 2015). Ritual knowledge, as noted above, can lead to social differentiation, where knowledge is held by specific groups, such as community elders, or individuals, such as shamans. In the recent past, elaborate ritual activity, often framed within long ritual cycles and incorporating long range networks, provided Australian aboriginals with a means to develop hierarchy without economic wealth (Aretemova 2016). The principal inequality in aboriginal society was gender-based, and while ritual inequality gave an economic benefit, importantly that inequality did not become hereditary, and society remained fundamentally governed by egalitarian principles (Peterson, this volume). Identifying differential ritual knowledge in prehistory is not only a difficult matter of identification, but its impact on egalitarian or hierarchical structures becomes difficult to interpret.

Integrative architecture

The requirement for hierarchical organizational structures commonly associated with demographic pressure can be mitigated through the use of integrative architecture (Adler 1989). In contrast to aggrandizer models of individuals emerging with

greater power (*cf.* Hayden 2001), integrative structures reduce the pressure for hierarchies and appear to work to "foster cooperation" (Feinman 2013: 44). Adler and Wilshusen (1990) determined a high rate (79%) of non-residential integrative architecture present in "tribal" and "village" societies. In their ethnographic example the very high incidence of integrative buildings was present regardless of community size (ranging from 75 to 500 people in their sample). In some instances, the integrative architectural buildings were small, but in these cases there were multiple examples of such buildings, and each might serve small segments of a society within a small spatial area. In combination these small structures could serve the entire community. In contrast, larger structures might individually serve an entire community, or even multiple communities. Perhaps counter-intuitively, these large structures might not have room to contain all of the larger populations served, and therefore start to enable inequality of participation. Within small non-stratified societies, integrative architecture is used for both secular (ie cooking, eating, sleeping, craft activities) and ritual roles, where these can be separated. As societies grow in scale, a more a strictly ritual function emerges in integrative architecture (Adler, Wilshusen 1990).

Property

One of the major differences perceived between hunting and gathering and farming societies, frequently argued to be a barrier to easy transition, is that hunter-gatherers do not own private property, and their principles of sharing prevent the adoption of farming, as any investment of labor in farming is easily lost (*cf.* Bowles, Choi 2013). This traditional argument has been countered, particularly with examples from complex hunter-gather societies with delayed return economies, who build facilities and store goods, often as the result of shared labor (Woodburn 1982). Property rights may therefore arise from storage, specifically private storage, rather than farming (Bowles, Choi 2013). Modern ethnographic examples, where only one or two individuals cultivate crops within a hunter-gatherer group and then lose the harvest to demand sharing, are not applicable to an early Neolithic context, as even if sharing is enforced, food production is not limited to individuals experimenting in adopting a well-established farming system.

There are inevitable tensions between wishing to keep control over the products of your own labor, and demand sharing of what other people produce (Leppard 2019). Many societies have rules to limit the capacity of individuals and households to control resources. Differential wealth may have been possible in the Natufian, but it had natural limits in a context of limited, or no, food production. The *production* of resources in the earliest Neolithic begins to remove this limit, and it may be significant that it is at precisely the moment when people begin to be seriously engaged in this *production* of resources that we start to see the first really convincing evidence for enforced sharing. Neolithic goods and expertise were probably unevenly distributed, providing a potential source for differential wealth and potentially acting as a major driver for the growth of inequality and complex societies. The new, and probably still fragile, food producing economies of the PPNA did not inherit sharing or egalitarian behavior, but developed them as an innovative response to newly arising problems, in contrast to Testart's belief that storage led to socio-economic inequality as it permitted the development of wealth differentials (Testart 1982).

Archaeological Evidence

The Natufian (14,900–11,750 cal BP)

A very brief discussion of the Natufian is provided here to provide the context from which the early Neolithic developed. Regardless of arguments that Neolithic traits can be observed in societies going back 20,000 years (*e. g.* Sterelny, Watkins 2015; Hodder 2018), the Natufian marks a significant change from preceding Epipaleolithic societies in Southwest Asia. There are marked changes in the nature of settlement, with the appearance of substantial stone-built architecture, in some locations forming large settlements, indicating an increasing concern with place, and possibly an increased degree of sedentism. The Natufian is generally regarded as a complex hunter-gatherer society making intensive use of resources, was possibly delayed return, non-egalitarian, possibly with inherited status (Byrd 2005; Hayden 2004). Importantly, the Natufian is not a monolithic society or period, and the Late Natufian is understood to involve a reversion to greater mobility and a decline in complexity corresponding to the Younger Dryas climate downturn at the end of the Pleistocene (Henry 2013; Moore, Hillman 1992). That understanding may in turn be an oversimplification, as recent excavations at Nahal Ein Gev II (Grosman *et al*. 2016) and Shubayqa (Richter *et al.* 2017) have suggested greater continuity through the Natufian and onto the PPNA. However, whatever the precise details, it is strikingly clear that the Natufian does not provide a simple, egalitarian hunter-gatherer social platform for Neolithic developments.

Ritual knowledge

One burial, containing amongst other material a rich faunal assemblage including numerous tortoises, a leopard pelvis, and an eagle wing has been found at Hilazon Tachtit, which has been interpreted as a shaman's burial (Grosman *et al.* 2008). Such an identification suggests the presence of ritual specialists within society, possibly indicating acquired status. Evidence for funerary feasting at this site and Raqafet indicates additional ritual complexity within the Natufian (Munro, Grosman 2010).

Integrative architecture

At the Natufian site of 'Ain Mallaha, there is what appears to be a communal building, with a plaster bench running round its interior. A large structure at Wadi Hammeh, combined with a large stone sculpture, may also indicate the use of integrative architecture, and possibly ritual ceremony, within the Natufian (Edwards 2012). Several Natufian settlements also have pits that have been argued to have served as storage features, associated with individual domestic structures (Grosman, Munro 2017), although it has been argued that their significance has been overstated (Bar-Yosef 1998; Olzsewski 1991). If they were associated with individual domestic structures, then even if their storage function has been correctly attributed, they cannot have served an integrative purpose.

Property

There are aspects of the Natufian that suggest developing ownership of property, partly evident in the storage, and perhaps expressed by differential displays of wealth. The domestic storage pits, if they are associated with individual dwelling structures, may indicate household property, although at this point in time the household is

probably a simple family household, not the corporate entities that may have developed by the Late PPNB. Wealth may be suggested by the presence of grave goods, in particular elaborate shell artifacts found on some burials. Unlike the sparse Upper Paleolithic burial evidence, in the Natufian there is clear variation in the quantity of decoration with individual burials, although no clear pattern has emerged. Decorated burials only account for c 10% of Natufian burials (Grosman, Munro 2017), leading to proposals that the burials reveal a ranked society (Wright 1978). However, Natufian burial evidence may not indicate social ranking (Belfer-Cohen 1995; Byrd, Monahan 1995), and the burial evidence does not confirm fixed social roles (Boyd 2001).

Beyond the burial data, large, well-made ground-stone tools, especially mortars, appear in the Natufian. These would not have been easily portable, and arguments have been put forward that these large tools indicate private ownership of equipment (Hodder 2018).

The Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA) (12,000 to 10,300 cal BP)

The PPNA develops in the southern Levant directly from the Natufian, and although it is conventionally described as Neolithic, PPNA subsistence is still heavily reliant on wild foods, especially the hunting of animals, although morphologically wild cereals are cultivated.

Ritual knowledge

Burial practices are enormously varied in the PPNA (for example at WF16, where burials included subfloor secondary burial, primary burials, isolated skull burial, and one skull cache (Mithen *et al.* 2015), but one aspect they have in common is that grave goods are almost non-existent, in sharp contrast to the Natufian. The numerous examples of secondary burial and multiple burials suggest that despite the special treatment of some skulls, individuality was not the focus of mortuary practice. Complex burial practices indicate an ongoing interactive process, not a finished state, but an ongoing relationship between the living and the dead.

Funerary practices in the PPNA often appear to remove or conceal individual identity. At sites like WF16, with its huge diversity of burials, it appears that ritual is not replicated accurately or consistently, suggesting ritual knowledge is not very formalized and is not performed by specialists. El-Hemmeh, from the Late PPNA (10,800–10,399 BP), is different, here a site appears to have a designated mortuary area, specifically designed and built, containing a small group of near identical burials, and with considerable investment into architectural features (Makarewicz, Rose 2011). The consistent nature of burial practice at el-Hemmeh may indicate more formal transmission of ritual knowledge by this phase of the PPNA, and the investment placed into burying a relatively small number of people may indicate ritual status.

Integrative architecture

Communal architecture appears widely in the PPNA, from the upper Euphrates to southern Jordan. Examples include the *batiments communitaires* from Jerf al Ahmar, an early version of which appears as a shared storage building (with no space for other activities), and a later version which functioned as a meeting room, with a bench surrounding a central space (Stordeur *et al.* 2000). Communal storage buildings, or granaries, and communal food processing structures have been found at PPNA sites in southern Jordan, including Dhra' (Kuijt, Finlayson 2009) and WF16 (Finlayson *et al.* 2011). The implication of these freestanding storage buildings is that harvests were

held not just communally, but in buildings where access to stores was visible and public, enforcing a sharing ethos, intentionally hampering any accumulation of wealth. Visibility and enforced sharing suggest not only that was this not a private resource, but that it is unlikely to have been a corporate household's own property.

Investment and saving in a delayed return economy provide the opportunity for the development of unequal ownership of resources and, once wealth could take the form of domesticated animals and cereals, these could be stored inside your own dwelling (Bowles, Choi 2013; Woodburn 1982). PPNA society appears to have a number of mechanisms designed to stress community and prevent individualism, limiting differential wealth creation. PPNA subsistence, though clearly now incorporating a substantial delayed return element, was very specifically prevented from being used as means to inequality, and PPNA societies appear to have deliberately mitigated against these possibilities by placing their stored goods in shared buildings, intentionally counteracting the potential for private or corporate wealth creation. The scale of storage remains relatively small, suggesting that large-scale surpluses were not created.

In the northern Levant during the PPNA, where communal buildings were not large enough for an entire community to gather in, they may have served restricted groups, enabling differential status to emerge. The possible meeting room at Jerf al Ahmr in northern Syria, could have allowed select groups, such as elders or initiates of secret societies, to meet in what may have been hidden from the rest of the community. In the southern Levant, the Jericho tower escapes this space constraint by serving as an open-air focus (*e. g.* Barkai, Liran 2008). The t-shaped pillars of Gobekli Tepe in Turkey (Schmidt 2005), and the communal structure at WF16 in southern Jordan (Finlayson *et al.* 2011) also appear designed for ceremony and performance, and are of a size where substantial numbers of people were presumably involved both in creating the architecture and in its use. Such large corporate works are potentially indicative of Feinman's 'corporate route' to social complexity (Feinman 2013). It is striking that, in southern Jordan at least, settlements were not, or not entirely, built around domestic residences: the communal buildings seem to have been the site focus. This appears to reflect a need for integration and connectivity to foster cooperation as the scale of society increases.

Integrative architecture is common in the PPNA, including small-scale, repeated forms, such as the shared storage buildings and food processing structures of the PPNA site of Dhra'. Dhra' occupies a site of c 1 hectare, the largest PPNA settlement in Jordan, and at Dhra' there appear to be examples of duplicate forms of these shared buildings, presumably each serving small segments within this community. Through the duplication of these buildings, the entire community would have had access to such facilities. The situation may be different in the northern Levant, where, for example at Jerf el-Ahmar, communal architecture was not public, nor big enough for the entire community, so may have served a segment of society with special status, although that status may have been acquired simply by age and or gender. The larger structures, for example the tower at Jericho, may have served multiple communities, while the communal structure at WF16 was large enough to have held the entirety of the small community living there.

New integrative institutions may not work unless widely adopted within a community (Bowles, Choi 2013). In the PPNA, communal buildings for ritual and ceremonial purposes may have helped in the adoption of new ideas and institutions. Communal, or group identity, appears to have been important, required and reinforced by

practical measures such as shared storage, but made socially necessary through the emphasis on group identity in burial and communal activities. The marked diversity between PPNA sites may have also been part of the emphasis of group and community identity, creating difference beyond each group to help bind the group together, but may also indicate multiple and different historical paths and the presence of strong local traditions.

Property

Unlike the uncertain evidence for Natufian storage, there is good evidence for PPNA food storage (Kuijt, Finlayson 2009). In contrast to the postulated household storage of the Natufian, all the PPNA storage features appear to be communal. The communal nature of PPNA storage appears to diverge from the assumed evolutionary context of a delayed return economy providing scope for increased private ownership. There is no clear evidence for private property within the PPNA, there are virtually no grave goods, and occupation horizons are routinely cleaned, leaving little evidence of any variation in wealth between individual structures or individuals. The construction of shared storage suggests that PPNA society appears to have designed a number of mechanisms to stress community and prevent individualism, limiting differential wealth creation. Subsistence, though clearly now incorporating a substantial delayed return element, was very specifically prevented from becoming a route to inequality.

The Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) (10,300–8,700 cal BP)

Although the main focus of this paper is on the PPNA, a brief consideration of subsequent developments in the PPNB is provided here to indicate the direction of development following the PPNA. There is no doubt that until the Late PPNB, all Neolithic societies remain small-scale, and therefore fit a basic requirement for the maintenance of an egalitarian society. Only with the larger sites of the Late PPNB (9500–8750 cal BP) do overall populations increase dramatically, although numbers still remain only in the few thousands even at the largest of settlements, in modern social terms still small-scale.

Rollefson (2000), amongst others, has argued that the plastered skulls of the Middle PPNB, given their limited number, must represent elites in society; those that were carefully selected for this treatment, perhaps with their status deriving from a role as ritual leaders. Other have argued that skull plastering was designed to conceal and reduce individualism (Kuijt 2004). Initially interpreted as elements of ancestor cults, subsequent analyses have shown that many of the plastered skulls are of young adults, perhaps unlikely to represent ancestors, or individuals who had accumulated significant status during their lives. The plastered skulls have also been interpreted as means to emphasize community, especially if households began to emerge as autonomous entities within society, threatening to pull apart the strong community identities of the PPNA (Kuijt 2008). It is notable that at Middle PPNB sites lacking skull-plastering mortuary practice, such as Beidha in southern Jordan, communal buildings appear to continue to play a role in community integration (Makarwicz, Finlayson 2018). It is possible that there is a gradual shift in the development of corporate structures, used in the PPNA to emphasize an egalitarian community, and then in the PPNB used to resist the centripetal influence of emerging autonomous households.

Ritual knowledge

The pattern of diversity continues from the PPNA into the PPNB. As noted above, the plastered skulls have been interpreted in various ways, including as vehicles to emphasize community, especially once households began to become autonomous entities within communities. Kuijt has interpreted skull-plastering as part of an extended and highly complex series of mortuary practices (Kuijt 1996; 2008). The periodic nature of these suggest they functioned as rare, dramatic events, with the rituals probably requiring significant ritual and technical knowledge that was clearly separate from daily practice (Makarewicz, Finlayson 2018). There is some evidence for the appearance of specific ritual structures, as at Beidha and Ain Ghazal (Rollefson 2005), suggesting that at this point in time ritual specialists had appeared, or re-appeared.

Integrative architecture

A more solely ritual function is likely to emerge as societies grow in scale (Adler, Wilshusen 1990), and this may be seen in the emergence of the specialized cult, or ritual buildings in the PPNB (Rollefson 1997). These specialized ceremonial buildings may reflect social integration being achieved through collective ceremony and public architecture, although such buildings remain rare in the southern Levant. As corporate/household societies begin to emerge in the PPNB, as shown by the development of new house architecture, nested levels of community are created, with families, lineages and clans providing the potential to deal with the problems created by community growth, such as a loss in personal knowledge and intimacy, by developing segmented societies (Kelly 2000). Such social organization does not necessarily equate to simple hierarchy, heterarchical organization may allow multiple means of ranking or recognizing power and influence while influence in ritual may not affect other domains of interaction.

Property

The pattern of inter-site diversity seen in the PPNA continues into the PPNB, although by the Late PPNB storage appears to have increasingly been pulled within increasingly substantial 'houses, for example the multi-roomed 'Basta-house' (Gebel *et al.* 2006). Such recognizable houses, containing significant storage features, may provide archaeological evidence for the emergence of corporate households, and it is possible that corporate households and corporate property emerge in the Late PPNB (Ames 2007; Banning, Byrd 1987). The emphasis would appear to remain on corporate ownership, and although the locus of corporate behavior had now become the household rather than the community, there is still no indication of any development of individual wealth (and still no grave goods). The adoption of very standardized forms of big house suggests that even as corporate household wealth may have been developing, measures were created to conceal difference in wealth within the house. It is clear that differential wealth takes a very long time to become established; within Jordan even in the Early Bronze Age there is little evidence for differential wealth in most settlements, although storage had become a major economic feature (Chesson, Goodale 2014).

Discussion

One major difficulty with arguments that early Neolithic societies were attempting to maintain egalitarian ways of life that they had inherited from their hunter-gatherer forbears is that the earliest Neolithic, the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA), is preceded

by the Natufian, frequently argued to represent a complex hunter-gatherer society, with evidence for non-egalitarian social structures (*e. g.* Hayden 2004). Even if we assume that preceding hunter-gatherers were egalitarian, or indeed that the original state of hunter-gatherer society was egalitarian, there are thousands of years between the early Neolithic and potentially egalitarian pre-Natufian, simple hunter-gatherer Epipalaeolithic societies.

A second difficulty in assuming that that PPNA society was attempting to maintain pre-existing egalitarian structures is that it may be the earliest archaeological period where we can detect archaeological evidence for deliberate mechanisms to promote egalitarian behavior. The early Neolithic is in general a period of considerable innovation, and it may be that enforced egalitarian behavior is a Neolithic development, at least within this Southwest Asian historical context. It therefore seems likely that the early Neolithic is not holding onto ancient egalitarian behavior patterns, but may be developing them, if not for the first time then at least anew, as a local innovation within the Southwest Asian historical context.

Our archaeological understanding of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism has been largely based on generalization from so-called 'simple' hunter-gatherer societies. This generalization has led some to assume it has great antiquity, and was the original and therefore universal form of social relations. Others have assumed that it is a recent adaptation to the marginal environments occupied by most modern hunter-gatherers, the socially hostile environment created by being surrounded by more powerful neighbors. Real egalitarian societies would have always been very rare and there is no reason to assume they should be our starting point in prehistory. Egalitarianism only exists in societies that have enforced leveling mechanisms — whether they be hunter-gatherers or not (Artemova 2016).

Individuality is important to many ideas of emergent hierarchy and the growth in power of aggrandizers, but there is little evidence for individualism, suggesting it was not a strong PPNA concept (*cf.* Strathearn 1988). This may indicate that Neolithic egalitarianism was different from modern hunter-gatherer egalitarian behavior, as it would have lacked the high level of individual autonomy common to modern egalitarian societies. The PPNA mechanisms designed to create equality within a community did not create highly autonomous individuals, but a tight-knit group. Neolithic burials practices that actively reduced individualism and promoted communal identities also provided a mechanism for holding the community together, a mechanism that grew in significance in some areas within the Middle PPNB (Benz 2010; Kuijt 2004; 2008). Where the most elaborate mortuary practices were not in use, communal architecture continued to play an important role (Makarewicz, Finlayson 2018). PPNA efforts to strengthen community identity through communal architecture, which helped enforce the ideology of sharing, may arise from the need to be able to harness group efforts to both bring in and process harvests sufficiently rapidly that food products could be stored. Early Neolithic collective action and cooperation would have reinforced sociality within a context of a rising population (Strathearn 1988). PPNA sites such as Jerf el Ahmar and WF16 were very tightly bounded settlements, with communal architecture that was integrative at the community level (Finlayson *et al.* 2011; 2013; Makarewicz, Finlayson 2018).

Conclusions

While the foundations of hierarchy are often assumed to lie in material production they can exist in other social realms such as the control of belief (Artemova 2016), and delayed return economies gave time for increased ritual activity (Testart 1982). In the PPNA there are mechanisms to encourage communal behavior in sharing food, in production, storage, and processing, but also in ceremony and burial. The PPNA appears as an example of a (partially) egalitarian delayed return economy. Artemova follows Barnard (1983) and argues that the difference between delayed return and immediate return economies is ideological with the '*degree of intensity of social life*, in particular collective rituals and inter-community contacts' being what is important to social organization. Not only are egalitarian hunter-gatherers rare, they are the product of deliberate strategies. PPNA egalitarian behavior, far from being a relict of more primitive societies, appears to have been both novel and enforced. It was directed mostly at production and consumption, with a clear emphasis on building the solidarity of the community. It is possible that non-egalitarian behavior began to emerge in the ritual domain. However, even if ritual knowledge was only available to some, it might be to categories of people rather than individuals, especially as there is no evidence that PPNA societies had a strong concept of the individual. The categories concerned, such as ritual experts, can be transient or emergent, and do not have to be small groups, but for example consist of all initiated men. At present, there is no evidence for PPNA consistent ritual expertise, or ritual specialists such as may be apparent in the Natufian, so we should be cautious in suggesting the development of a ritual hierarchy.

Apparently complex rituals develop during the PPN, and it is possible that the elaboration of ritual activity is part of the process of Neolithic societies gradually developing new means to manage the practicalities of the new subsistence economy, as well as the social demands of settlements that were gradually becoming more populous and more sedentary. The corporate mode of social organization (group oriented, consensus building, shared values) and the network mode (individual, dominance, hierarchical), are not mutually exclusive, and it is possible that in the PPN the diversity of integrative structures and burial practices reflect elements of both patterns of organization. However, in the PPNA the emphasis appears to be in group oriented behavior with no clear signs of hierarchy. Even in the PPNB, with the gradual emergence of households, there is little or no evidence of hierarchy, except perhaps in the apparent emergence of ritual experts from the Late PPNA onwards.

There are inevitable difficulties in establishing social modes through archaeological evidence, and we need to be wary of simply reinventing the past in the present. The tendency to interpret the Neolithic as an evolutionary step, succeeding complex hunter-gatherers, who succeed earlier simple hunter-gatherers, places us in a conceptual world where modern traditional societies represent frozen moments in time. No one today would argue that any modern hunter-gatherer society represents a fossilized prehistoric group, but rather that every modern society is the product of its own historical development. That understanding has to be extended to the past. Social and economic complexity are not to be understood in a 19th century framework where all change is driving towards urban civilization. Natufian and PPN developments are all historically contingent, and are not part of an irreversible evolutionary trajectory. Historical contingency is the antithesis of uniformitarian ethnographic analogy. By escaping from a teleological approach to evolutionary development and through studying each society in its own right, we rapidly discover a prehistoric world of considerable more diversity and complexity.

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