

Landscapes in Transition: understanding hunter-gatherer and farming landscapes in the early Holocene of Europe and the Levant

March 2007, Jordan

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The concept of landscape enjoys considerable popularity in archaeological interpretation today. And yet it is uncontroversial to state that the concept is somewhat ill-defined and inconsistent. In Gosden and Lock's terms this fluidity allows landscape to be a 'usefully ambiguous concept' but at times there is a danger that this very ambiguity affords imprecision in our narratives. This is particularly important where differing traditions of archaeological interpretation meet, as, for example, in the transition from hunting and gathering to farming. This transition has been understood as a major division in archaeological practice and attitudes to 'landscape' across the transition reflect this dichotomy. This in turn creates a weakness in our accounts of the processes involved in the transition.

To this end, we propose a workshop to examine what it is that makes hunter-gatherer and farming landscapes different in the late Pleistocene/early Holocene, taking case studies from the contrasting regions of the Levant, where the transition to farming is indigenous, and the NW of Europe, where the transformation is initiated externally. The contrast between the two regions will also provide valuable comparisons between archaeological traditions and bodies of evidence. This workshop will play an important function in bringing together scholars working on material from the British Isles and those in the Levant. At present research in both regions often ignores work in the other, yet models of the transition assume some common elements, such as a major divide between hunter-gatherer and farmer world views, generally based upon an underlying traditional concept of hunter-gatherers being within nature, and farmers being apart from it. There is often a lack of context in analysis, which treats hunter-gatherer, farmer, and the transition as if they were universal phenomena. It is not clear that such common approaches are necessarily applicable. Landscape archaeology will be used as a focus for assessing these differences.

Topics for discussion include:

What is it that makes landscapes different?

- Is it the result of hunters and gatherers having a radically different world view from farmers? And if so, at what point does this transform?
- Is it the nature of the evidence?
- Or is it the concerns of archaeologists and our tendency to discuss change in terms of opposition and dichotomy?
- Or is the change less substantial and part of a long, incremental process?
- Is there a commonality in the transition in NW Europe and the Near East, as reflected in a difference between hunter-gatherer and farmer? If not, does this significantly change our understanding of both the transition and the nature of late Pleistocene/early Holocene societies?

How do we study landscapes in this period?

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- Are the scales of analysis between hunter-gatherer (EpiPalaeolithic and mesolithic) and Neolithic archaeologies so different that "landscape" is not a common concept that we can use to study this transitional period?
- What methodological approaches characterise hunter-gatherer and farmer archaeologies?
- Can "landscape" be used as a focus for studying world-view?

The chronological range of this conference is period of transition from the Epipalaeolithic / Mesolithic to the Neolithic (*sensu lato*). Specifically taking the economic transition from hunter-gatherer to farming landscapes reflects conventional understandings developed in anthropological studies that accepted a modern divide between the two types of society, and archaeological research that both accepted this division and imposed it on the past, and has tended to consider oppositions rather than transitions. However, part of the purpose of the workshop is to tease out what elements are significant for the way people's attitudes to the world around them and their impact on the landscape will have changed, how much or how rapidly these transitions took place, and whether they form a general pattern for the transition, or whether regional differences are far more important.

Workshop sessions will include

Ritual and Routine landscapes

This topic is to consider the ritualisation of the landscape through various media and processes. There are various early Neolithic sites in the Levant that suggest that some form of formalization of the sacred was occurring over the landscape. Unlike the monumentalisation associated with the British Neolithic, at least part of this seems to have been concealed, with hard to access cave sites such as Nahal Hemar being involved in ritual activities. This process may have its origins in the Natufian. There are other sites which appear to have served a largely ceremonial role, sites such as Kfar haHoresh. At the same time, ongoing work in Britain and Ireland highlights the integration of monuments with wider features of the landscape as whole and with wider spheres of routine behaviour. At the same time, it remains reasonably clear that the degrees to which, or preferably, the mechanisms by which, landscapes are ritualized changes considerably at the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in both areas.

Landscape and climate

This topic discusses the nature of late Pleistocene/Early Holocene physical landscape and climate changes. The role of climate change in the transition to farming has long been a subject of interest in both the Levant and northern Europe but accounts stressing this as a causal force have, more recently, seen strong critique. Recent research, however offers a rather different set of possibilities, with increasingly fine-grained temporal resolution and ecological models demanding integration into accounts. This is not to argue that climate change caused the adoption of agriculture: simply that any understanding of landscapes cannot be divorced from it.

Landscapes of settlement

In the Near East there are very dramatic changes in the way settlement appears to have been organized. Natufian sites range in size considerably, leading to various categorizations into base camps and task or seasonal camps, in models largely derived from notions of complex-hunter-gatherer behaviour. Similar models, and

models of seasonal mobility have been imposed, with varied success, on British and Irish data. Arguably in both the Levant and the British Isles these models are driven by simplified ethnographic concepts, rather than by the full range of archaeological evidence. The transition to the Neolithic leads in the Levant to the appearance of increasingly large sedentary sites (by the Late PPNB, the mega sites of the Jordanian plateau) which subsequently mostly collapse, to be replaced by a more scattered settlement pattern in the early pottery Neolithic. In some parts of Britain, settlement sites are not so well known as monumental sites, and our understanding of the changes in the way people located their settlements is surprisingly poor. In other areas, such as parts of Ireland, it is clear that the most significant form of monumentalisation of the landscape in the Neolithic takes the form of land division.

Landscape Change

The changing climates, changing settlement patterns, and changing methods of exploiting the environment are presumed to have effected an overall change in the landscape. While illustrations in popular books tend to show a transfer from a wild forest landscape to a fully domesticated and tilled one, much of the emphasis in the British context has been the monumentalisation of the landscape and a very different attitude to the world. This is not a process that has a direct analogue in the Levant, indeed some would argue that an intentional monumental process does not happen until the Bronze Age. An alternative major landscape change that is often postulated in the Levant is the steady damage to the environment around mega sites, caused by their over-exploitation through farming without soil management, goat herding, and the burning of timber to make lime on a huge scale. The degree of resource use change and its rapidity are central to the debate on use of the land and a corresponding change in attitudes.

Scale and Regions

It appears that in both parts of the world we are not yet sure what scale we should be studying. In the Levant there has been a great amount of new information coming from the northern Levant and from Anatolia that has changed our perceptions of what is happening in the traditionally more intensively studied southern Levant, and this in turn has been encouraging people to look at a very large region in attempts to understand the process that is happening. Within the British Isles there is debate over the importance of regional diversity, or whether the results of dietary analysis from skeletal material indicates that the overall change of economy was far more significant than any local patterns. Arguably there are still many things we do not understand at a more intimate scale, and it is at that scale that it is easier to comprehend the role of agency.

Taskscape/Technology

The idea of the taskscape, and indeed the focus on technology, is an approach to landscape that has found favour in hunter-gatherer archaeology. In particular work in Britain and Ireland has drawn on the indivisibility of technology and landscape in assessing variability and temporality in the Mesolithic landscape. At the same time, the specific structures to technological organization have been utilized as a mechanism for understanding population change. In contrast, however, similar ideas are rarely been employed in Neolithic research. This perhaps reflects the idea that hunter-gatherers are part of the world and inhabit the landscape in a very different manner from farmers.

Landscapes and time

One of the issues that is most difficult to address is mobility and change at a human level. The degree of permanence and sedentism of hunter-gatherer and early farming sites of the period is difficult to establish. Where communities do appear to become increasingly settled, how much this reflects a base-camp mode of life where large parts of the community continue to be mobile is hard to establish. There is a tendency to see these patterns as consistent within archaeological phases. Landscapes have their own movement through time, on a long-term scale with processes of climate change, on a medium scale with annual fluctuations around the mean, and the shorter-term relatively stable pattern of seasons. Do seasonality and rain become increasingly significant to increasingly sedentary and agricultural populations?

Worldview, Contact and Colonisation

The caricatures that archaeologists often employ in discussions of hunter-gatherers and farmers includes discussion of how worldviews changed radically at the point of transition. Much of this has focused on attitudes expressed by wild and tame, belonging in the world or being external and altering the world. This perspective appears to be an area with much held in common between East and West. Apart from the issue of food acquisition, which is in some cases more blurred, this is often presented as the biggest divide between the two modes of life. Yet the relationship between hunter-gatherers and farmers (and the transitional states in between) is often ignored. In the Levant the focus is always on the transition of hunter-gatherers into farmers, and the subsequent spread of those farmers with their ideas, into a landscape that often appears to be thought of as empty.

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