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Ethnicity During the Neolithic: A Mosaic of Cultures

Introduction

Social identity or "ethnicity," a central theme of this volume, is an elusive concept to define. Even in contemporary society, ethnicity is fluid, often with vague or overlapping meanings. Much about ethnicity is related to self perceptions, to ways in which we set ourselves apart from other groups, but this often is more a reflection of class status rather than ethnicity. As difficult as it might be to define modern ethnicity, the problem is compounded many times in examining archaeological ethnicity. Certainly the literature is full of attempts to do so (Horvath 1983; Conkey and Hastorf 1991; Jones 1997; Shennan 1989). This issue becomes especially clouded when archaeologists attempt to use their discipline for political ends, which frequently invoke aspects of ethnicity (cf. Glock 1994; Meskell 1998).

Political misapplications notwithstanding, in most cases, archaeological ethnic distinctions are applied to relatively late, complex societies who often possess written records and who manufacture artifacts that are presumably ethnically identifiable (McGuire 1982). When we go into deeper prehistory, especially before the invention of writing or distinctive artifacts such as ceramics that may encode ethnic meanings, the situation is even more challenging. In this admittedly speculative essay, I examine possibilities of identifying ethnicity from the perspective of the relatively "deep time" of the Levantine Neolithic.

Possible Ethnic Markers in the Levantine Neolithic

Over the past twenty or so years, our understanding of the Neolithic has exploded, and includes considerable discussion on social issues as well as material culture alone (Kuijt 2000). Much of the newer research has emanated from Jordan, where a rich mosaic of Neolithic societies is documented. When one examines the greater Near East, and even some of the Mediterranean islands, which are addressed later in this paper, it is clear that an incredible amount of diversity characterized the Near Eastern Neolithic. One might reasonably ask if this diversity provides us with any clues to distinct ethnic identities.

How, in fact, can archaeologists infer ethnicity from prehistoric contexts, Neolithic or otherwise? The following is a brief and by no means comprehensive summary of how some researchers have suggested that clues to ethnicity might be documented.

Perhaps one of the most commonly implied markers of early ethnicity is in chipped stone style, especially as it relates to variation in projectile points (Sackett 1982, 1985; Wiessner 1983, 1984). Certainly during the Neolithic, projectile points were one of the most distinct and variable of chipped stone artifacts. Many researchers believe that point variation may reflect stylistic differences, and from style to ethnicity is but a short step.

While there may be some strength to this stylistic argument, one must be cautious. A recent study (Powell 2000) examining a sample of nearly 500 points from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) site of Ghuwayr I in southern Jordan (Simmons and Najjar 1998, 2000) made several interesting observations relating to style. Typically, most projectile point variation occurs in either the tang or the shoulders. This can be quite pronounced, as with, for example, Jericho or Byblos points. While the shoulders may be visible during usage, and thus could represent different social markers, it is unlikely that the same is true for the tang, since it is the hafting element and when in use would have been invisible. Thus using the tang is not very convincing for stylistic or ethnic distinctions. Furthermore, it is likely that if the weapons systems of which projectile points were a part had any stylistic significance, this might have been more readily expressed in highly visible organic aspects, such as the shafts or feathers. These, of course, are rarely preserved in the archaeological record.

Even if projectile points do represent social or stylistic distinctions, can these be translated to ethnicity? I suspect not, simply because most Neolithic sites contain several types of points. In other words, we cannot point to certain types occurring in only certain regions. Projectile points

may be sensitive indicators of some aspect of social life, but this unlikely reflects ethnicity.

Art also may represent ethnicity, as it often does in the contemporary world. Certainly the spectacular statues of 'Ayn Ghazāl (Tubb and Grisson 1995) must have represented something very important. But these are extremely rare, occurring elsewhere only at Jericho. If human statuary marked ethnicity, one would expect that more sites would contain these elements. One could argue that such statutes do in fact exist at many sites, particularly larger ones, but that they simply have not been recovered due to sampling problems. This, clearly, is a non-productive argument.

Far more common at Neolithic sites are figurines, but again, can these be tied to ethnicity? I doubt it, as they range over a huge geographic region, and do not seem related to specific regions. One might make an argument that more elaborate figurines appear to occur at the large "mega-sites", such as 'Ayn Ghazāl, while more primitive ones occur at smaller sites, such as Ghuwayr I. But, whether or not this is a consistent pattern is unclear-levels of reporting are inadequate to determine this, and sampling again is always a potential biasing problem. Even if this dichotomy could be documented, would it indicate ethnicity? Many researchers attach a ritual or symbolic significance to Neolithic art (Cauvin 2000), and while some aspect of ethnicity may be encoded within such objects, it would be a tremendous speculative jump to read too much into this. Art is just as likely to serve as an icon relating to ritual or class, rather than specific ethnic identities.

Archaeologists have often assumed that human burials reflect ritual behavior that could have ties to ethnicity (Chesson 2001; Humphreys and King 1981). Certainly in contemporary society, this may be the case, although, once again, modern analogies may blur the distinctions between ethnicity and other cultural markers, such as socio-economic status and nationality. Regardless, mortuary studies in archaeology encompass a huge literature that cannot be addressed here. It does, however, seem reasonable to propose that certain regularities in Neolithic burial patterns may in fact reflect some aspect of ethnicity.

One of the enduring traits of the PPNB is the consistent pattern of human burials being interred beneath house floors and being decapitated. This occurs at large and small sites throughout the Neolithic world. If anything, the consistent pattern reflects a wide-spread Neolithic unity, perhaps one ethnicity rather than many. But, there are some striking distinctions. Certainly the remarkable site of Kfar Hahoresh in the Galilee is one example (Goring-Morris 2000). Here, numerous humans and animals are buried, often in a variety of patterns. Who were these people? Were they ethnically related? We may never know, but thus far, Kfar Hahoresh remains unique during the PPNB.

Another burial distinction occurs at Ghuwayr I, where virtually no "traditional" subfloor burials have yet been recorded. Most are group burials in room fill with their crania intact. There is only one subfloor interment, and this is of an infant, only 7-9 months old. The Ghuwayr child was carefully buried in a room laden with presumed grave offerings, including numerous goat skulls, a cow skull with intact horns, chipped stone caches, and other artifacts. The baby itself had a mother of pearl necklace (Simmons and Najjar 2000). What makes the Ghuwayr I child so unusual is that infant burials are relatively rare in the PPNB, and certainly the elaborate nature of this one indicates that the baby was very special indeed. Whether or not the child died accidentally or was a sacrifice cannot be determined, but certainly this child was a very important person. But, again, this begs the question: does this, or other PPNB burials, represent ethnicity? My suspicion is that it does not.

What about architecture? Certainly during the Neolithic, there was a tremendous amount of architectural variability. Again, one may look at the huge "mega-sites", compare these to smaller communities, and ask if distinctions reflect ethnicity.

One objective of the Ghuwayr I project was to determine if smaller communities, such as Ghuwayr I or Bayḍa, represented peripheral outposts to larger core settlements, such as 'Ayn Ghazāl, Wādī Shu'ayb, or aṣ-Ṣifiyya (Simmons and Najjar 1998). Although analyses are still underway, it is clear that the architecture of Ghuwayr I is extremely complex and, in many ways, more variable than at the mega-sites. In fact, many of the mega-sites give the impression of monotony, with densely packed units reflecting little variation. A possible exception to this might be the so-called "temples" at 'Ayn Ghazāl (Rollefson 2000). At Ghuwayr I there are large, deep structures, much rebuilding, rooms with undoubted ritual significance, dual internal stairways in at least one structure, and a remarkable feature that we have interpreted as a public forum, along the lines of a "theater" (Simmons and Najjar 2000). What this suggests is that Ghuwayr I certainly was not a remote peripheral outpost. In fact, it may have served as an elite enclave. But once again, does this diversity reflect ethnicity? I do not think that we can directly assume this.

So, what does all this mean? I have been cautious about suggesting that these traits relate to Neolithic ethnicity. What I think is reflected is a strong sense of regionalism that cross-cuts possible ethnic boundaries. The amount of variation across the landscape may well reflect some kind of tribal identity, but for the time being, the concept of Neolithic ethnicity remains slippery.

Expanding to the Mediterranean-the Cyprus Example

I would now like to direct attention further afield, to an

area that rarely is given much attention to during the Neolithic by mainland archaeologists. This is the island of Cyprus. What, one might ask, can Cyprus possibly tell us about ethnicity during the Neolithic? Let me outline the traditional view, and then expand by summarizing exciting recent research on this island, which, it must be remembered, is only about 100km from the Levantine mainland.

Unlike the mainland, there is virtually no evidence for pre-Neolithic occupation of Cyprus, and most scholars felt that the first settlers arrived with a full Neolithic package (cf. LeBrun *et al.* 1987). Cyprus is not unique in this. With few exceptions, most of them not very well verified, there is little evidence for pre-Neolithic occupation of any the Mediterranean islands (Cherry 1990, 1992).

As on the mainland, in Cyprus there is a Pre-Pottery Neolithic followed by a Pottery Neolithic period. Conventional wisdom, based primarily on the excavation of large village sites such as Khirokitia, Kalavassos *Tenta*, or Kholetria *Ortos* was that the Pre-Pottery Neolithic was relatively late, and that there were few mainland parallels (LeBrun *et al.* 1987; Knapp, Held, and Manning 1994). The Pre-Pottery Neolithic, or "Khirokitia Culture", is relatively late by mainland standards, beginning around 7000 BC, and apparently is separated by a chronological gap from the subsequent Pottery Neolithic, or "Sotira Culture" representing, to many, new migrations of people. This sounds suspiciously similar to mainland views of the Pre-Pottery and Pottery Neolithic, although this myth has been dispelled by the documentation of the "Pre-Pottery Neolithic C" (PPNC) transitional phase (cf. Rollefson 1990).

In many ways, the Pre-Pottery Neolithic of Cyprus was traditionally viewed as a somehow less sophisticated version of its mainland counterparts. There are many reasons for this, but they generally relate to the apparent late arrival of Neolithic peoples to the island, and to their seemingly less complex material culture, which appeared to bear few similarities to their mainland counterparts. Although it is a given that the Neolithic colonizers of Cyprus must have arrived from either the Levant or Anatolia, they apparently retained few distinctive mainland traits. In general, their culture was relatively impoverished, except for elaborate ground stone assemblages. Chipped stone was not believed to be very sophisticated, architecture never progressed beyond circular structures, and there was little evidence for the elaborate ritual behavior seen on the mainland. Indeed, in a provocative, if empirically unfounded, article, Avraham Ronen (1995) proposed that the early Cypriot occupants were essentially a conservative religious sect that he termed "Asprots". Although ethnicity was not explicitly addressed, the feeling was that Cypriot Neolithic peoples quickly lost their mainland traits and rapidly assumed an unique identity formed by the isolated constraints of an island.

This traditional view of the Cypriot Neolithic has dramatically changed in the past 15 years. First, we now know that Cyprus was, in fact, occupied much earlier than previously thought. This has been documented through the controversial site of Akrotiri *Aetokremnos*. This small, collapsed rockshelter has literally re-written our understanding of the Mediterranean. *Aetokremnos* is firmly dated to about 10,000 cal BC, which is some 3, 000 years earlier than the previously believed first occupation, and we have suggested that it belongs to a previously undocumented cultural period that we termed the "Akrotiri Phase". Perhaps even more significantly, *Aetokremnos* is associated with a huge assemblage of extinct endemic Pleistocene fauna, primarily represented by pygmy hippopotami (Simmons 1999).

This is important, as the role of humans in the extinction of Pleistocene mega-fauna has always been a controversial topic in contemporary archaeology (Martin and Klein 1964). While it is abundantly clear that humans cause extinctions, especially on islands (Anderson 1991; Steadman 1995), evidence for this is primarily from relatively recent times, and the human culprits were agriculturalists. *Aetokremnos*, however, provides empirical data stretching back over 10,000 years suggesting that humans who were at best early Neolithic peoples played a role in the extinction of this unique fauna during the early Holocene. While other, perhaps climatic, variables undoubtedly also were important, *Aetokremnos* demonstrated a relationship between people and extinct Pleistocene fauna.

Aetokremnos also is significant since it indicates that people were in Cyprus at roughly the same time that Late Natufian or early Neolithic events were occurring on the mainland. Who were these early explorers, and can we assign an ethnicity to them? The assemblage from *Aetokremnos* would fit easily within a Late Natufian/PPNA context, but a more specific ethnicity cannot be identified. My feeling is that the occupants of *Aetokremnos* were disgruntled, perhaps conservative peoples, who did not want to participate in the on-going "Neolithic Revolution" on the mainland and thus left (cf. Simmons 1999: 319-323). I do not, however, feel that Ronen's "Asprot" concept can be fully supported, especially in light of intriguing new evidence emerging from current excavations, as summarized in the next few paragraphs.

Subsequent to our research at Akrotiri, recent data has made the picture even more complex. Two newly investigated sites, *Mylouthkia* (Peltenberg *et al.* 2000, 2001) and *Shillamkambos*, (Guilane *et al.* 1995; Vigne *et al.* 2000) extend the Cypriot Neolithic back to at least 8,000 BC and show distinct material ties with the Levantine mainland, especially in the form of Byblos points.

Especially important is that both of these sites date to an earlier, previously undetected aceramic Neolithic

phase, which has been termed the "Cypro-PPNB" (Peltenberg *et al.* 2001). By extending the aceramic Neolithic back at least a thousand years, the gap between the Akrotiri Phase and the earliest Neolithic is now considerably lessened.

This new research also has expanded the Neolithic economic package on Cyprus to include cows, which previously had not been documented until the Bronze Age. In fact, cattle also are confirmed by new investigations at *Ais Yiorkis,* dating to the early Khirokitia culture (Simmons 1998). It is with these new economic developments that Ronen's hypotheses of conservative "Asprots" runs into difficulty. He suggested that the absence of cattle on Cyprus during the Neolithic was related to this conservatism. Certainly we know that cattle were revered by at least some Neolithic mainlanders, as exemplified at sites such as Catal Huyuk in Turkey (e.g., Voigt 2000). Ronen hints that the absence of cattle in Neolithic Cyprus was not surprising, since these conservative people might not have brought with them traditional mainland ritual behavior and beliefs. Indeed, the French excavators at *Shillamkambos* appear to agree that the unexpected appearance of cattle so early in Cyprus might have been more related to ritual rather than economic functions (Vigne *et al.* 2000: 95). I feel, however, that the presence of cattle documented at two Neolithic sites, one from an early aceramic phase (*Shillamkambos*) and the other from the Khirokitia Aceramic Phase (*Ais Yiorkis*) suggests that these animals were, in fact, part of a previously undocumented economic pattern, perhaps akin to modern "ranching" (Simmons 2001).

So, do any of these new developments tell us anything about the ethnicity of the early Cypriots? Some scholars seem convinced that these early Neolithic Cypriots originated from Syria, and some even point specifically to the PPNA site of Jurf al-Aḥmar (Peltenberg *et al.* 2001). They base this, largely, on artifactual similarities. Thus it is not a far leap to assume that the ethnicity of the early Cypriots would be Syrian, rather than southern Levantine. However, for various reasons, some discussed earlier, I remain unconvinced that we can yet apply distinct ethnicity to these people. While the similarities with Jurf al-Aḥmar are undeniable, I think that the assemblages from *Shillamkambos* and *Mylouthkia* would also fit within Levantine PPNB groups.

Conclusions

In conclusion, where does all this leave us It seems clear that there were distinct tribal entities throughout the Levant during the Neolithic, a mosaic of cultures if you will. I am certain, for example, that the residents of individual settlements identified themselves strongly as people from, say, 'Ayn Ghazāl, or Ghuwayr I, or whatever they called their villages, and that they took great pride in their communities. On the other hand, there are several unifying variables that link the Levantine Neolithic over a huge area, cross-cutting what may have been specific ethnic identities. This argues against distinct ethnicities, instead suggesting a more pan-Neolithic ethnic identity that may have been tempered by regional distinctions. New research on Cyprus has expanded the range of these Neolithic peoples, indicating that they, too, kept their mainland identities for a considerable period of time. What all this new research really points to is the fact that it is an interesting and challenging time to be doing Neolithic archaeology throughout the Near East.

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