ABSTRACTS

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Neolithic ontologies

Rethinking radical alterity of the Eurasian Neolithics

UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA
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NEOLITHIC ONTOLOGIES:
RETHINKING RADICAL ALTERITY OF THE EURASIAN NEOLITHICS

There is a renewed hope that the past is ultimately knowable; an optimism that science can answer almost any question about it. We are witnessing a surge in scientific narratives about the Neolithic, written in terms of the natural sciences and presented as more rigorous than traditional archaeological methods. This is an exciting time, as our knowledge of the past has expanded exponentially.

However, this scientific turn has also led to increasingly simplified views of the past. The Neolithic is often interpreted through the lens of modern Western categories and framed by the positivist logic of scientific knowledge.

The Neolithic was profoundly distinct. People saw and interacted with the world in ways that were radically unlike our own. If we accept that Neolithic ways of life were not just different "cultures" or "beliefs" describing the same objective reality but entirely other ways of being, we must also acknowledge that their worlds were made up of entirely different things, unique entities, relationships, and processes.

This seminar emphasises the importance of recognising and engaging with the alterity of the Neolithic. What were unique Neolithic entities, things and relationships? Can we generate the conceptual shifts necessary to understand what these things were in their context? Can archaeology uncover the transformative powers embedded in different ways of life, offering new conceptual understandings of the past? Can we understand and appreciate this radical alterity without assimilating it into our worldview? Can we focus on the specificity of material culture and its ability to challenge established concepts and grand narratives, such as domestication, the Neolithic revolution, and food production?

Ultimately, this is a call to explore and embrace difference. It challenges traditional narratives and foundational assumptions about the Neolithic, presenting an open-ended invitation to think deeply about its alterity, an attempt to rethink and reimagine the Neolithic in all its diversity.

TIDALECTIC ONTOLOGIES: ARCHIPELAGIC THINKING AS A SOURCE FOR NEOLITHIC BECOMINGS

John Chapman (Durham University, UK)

It seems to me that, with a few exceptions, archaeologists have not paid serious attention to the flood of post-Second World War research on archipelagos. In 1973, John D. Evans framed islands as "laboratories for culture change" (with later imitators), while Broodbank's magisterial "Middle Sea" volume doesn't mention archipelagos but does note that islands constitute 1/3 of the total coastline of the Mediterranean even though forming <5% of its land-mass. What have we been missing?

The principal theorist of archipelagos – Édouard Glissant – highlighted characteristics of his homeland Caribbean – an emphasis on particularity and multiplicity, a rhizomatic structure with multiple roots and identities, and the belonging to a particular place (its singularity) but at the same time connected to the entire world (its connectivity). In a word, archipelagic thinking is inherently relational. It is important to note that Glissant extended the notion of archipelagic thinking far beyond the Caribbean not only to other ocean groups but also to all land-masses – as a concept that helps us to understand the entire world. For Glissant (and also Derek Walcott), archipelagic thinking is "a framework to theorize multiplicity and difference".

As an example of archipelagic ontologies, I shall examine the work of Kamau Brathwaite to see how we can use archipelagic thinking in our own research in Neolithic ontologies. He emphasises an ontology of becoming in the development of his concept of "tidalectics" the tidal ebb-and-flow of life in which interaction is the core (and opposed to Hegelian dialectics). Tides do not return the archipelago to the same state each night – in tide country "transformation is the rule of life". Brathwaite sees a mirroring of archipelagic culture and psychology in landscapes and natural rhythms.

I examine two examples of archipelagic thinking for the Neolithic. The emergence of archipelagos in the Adriatic Basin in the course of the Holocene is an example of tidalectics. In the second example, I invite delegates to think about "loess islands" in Central Europe in terms of archipelagos in a wider landscape and the existence of "hunter-gatherer islands" in larger loessic areas.

My general aim is to provide examples of how the move away from Hegelian dialectics and the end-result in synthesis could have a liberating effect on Neolithic research.

BECOMING NEOLITHIC IN THE ADRIATIC: LEGACY AND PERSISTENCE OF INSULAR MESOLITHIC HUNTER-FISHER-GATHERERS

Sonja Kačar (Austrian Archaeological Institute, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Austria)

The Neolithisation of the Adriatic (from c. 6000 cal BC) was a complex and regionally differentiated process, shaped by population movements and social interactions that unfolded unevenly across the region. In Dalmatia and Apulia, the transition to farming occurred relatively swiftly, as Anatolian groups established settlements in fertile plains and based their subsistence on agriculture and herding. Their involvement in the Gargano chert distribution network underscores the social role of these raw materials in connecting distant communities, while the organisation of lithic procurement and production reflects Anatolian traditions and a clear break from the Mesolithic. By contrast, the Neolithic way of life reached the northern Adriatic somewhat later and in more varied forms, marked by diverse ceramic styles, the importance of marine resources, and the persistence of Mesolithic (Castelnovian) lithic traditions - all pointing to the cultural coexistence of distinct social groups and a more prominent role of hunter-fisher-gatherers in the transition to farming.

However, new findings from the Dalmatian islands reveal a more complex picture of Neolithisation in the central and southern Adriatic, where local hunter-fisher-gatherers persisted and likely coexisted with early farming communities. These indigenous groups were probably not only active participants in the spread of Neolithic innovations, but also consciously maintained elements of their traditional lifeways in the generations following the arrival of farmers. Adopting a non-linear understanding of cultural change - and in light of evidence from the wider western Mediterranean showing the genetic resurgence of Mesolithic populations into the Middle and Late Neolithic - this presentation explores alternative scenarios of Neolithisation, including those that allow for the persistence of hunter-fisher-gatherers and for the existence of cultural hybridities, as well as fluid and mutable identities and lifeways.

To test such possibilities, Neolithisation must be examined through a *long durée* perspective that acknowledges the uneven and multidimensional nature of the process and moves beyond the narrow chronological frame of the Late Mesolithic/Early Neolithic boundary.

POPULATION DYNAMICS OF THE WESTERN AZOV REGION (6TH-5TH MILLENNIUM BC): NEW INSIGHTS

Nadezhda Kotova (National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine), Alexey Nikitin(Grand Valley State University, USA)

Isolated Neolithic and early Eneolithic monuments were studied in the steppe region of Ukraine on the western coast of the Sea of Azov. Among these, the most prominent is the Neolithic cemetery at Mariupol, excavated in the 1930s, which contained some burials dated to the Eneolithic period. Eighty years later, the Kalmius settlement, located opposite the Neolithic cemetery, was studied. The settlement likely housed the people who utilized the Neolithic Mariupol cemetery. In recent years, Grand Valley State University and Harvard University conducted genetic and isotope studies on the Neolithic and Eneolithic population of the steppe region of the Black Sea (the North Pontic region). A few months before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2023, samples were collected from the Neolithic and Eneolithic skeletons of the Mariupol cemetery, which were housed in the Mariupol Museum of Local Lore. These exhibits were destroyed along with the museum during the siege of Mariupol by the Russians. The study of the Kalmius settlement collection revealed that its materials belong to the eastern periphery of the Azov-Dnipro Neo-Eneolithic culture (5500-4750 BC). Additionally, the collection included isolated finds of the Early Eneolithic period. Genetic analysis of the Neolithic skeleton №50 of the Mariupol cemetery showed its similarity to individuals from Neolithic burial sites in the Dnipro River valley, including monuments associated with the Azov-Dnipro culture. At the same time, the Neolithic individual №50 harboured admixture from Caucasus Hunter Gathers, which was also sporadically detected in other Neolithic individuals from the Dnipro Valley. Furthermore, an individual of the Early Eneolithic period from the Mariupol cemetery exhibited a close connection to synchronous burials dating back to 5000 BC. Despite belonging to different archaeological groups and different chronological periods, the Neolithic and Eneolithic individuals shared a similar diet, as inferred from stable isotope ratios of carbon and nitrogen, indicating a subsistence strategy primarily based on high trophic-level fish and/or marine mammals. These findings provide valuable insights into the lives and culture of the people who inhabited the region during these ancient periods.

CARING FOR THE DEAD: RESULTS OF ARCHAEOTHANATOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN LINEARBANDKERAMIK BURIALS

Iseabail Wilks (University of York, UK)

The burial record of the Linearbandkeramik is one of the most intensively studied in Neolithic Europe. Paradoxically, this has created challenges in developing novel approaches which break away from traditional models and account for radically different Neolithic attitudes towards the dead. Mortuary treatment is recurrently reduced to binary classifications of 'normative' or 'deviant', often with only one form of practice being cited as standard: burial of the whole body, with the limbs flexed, at a cemetery. Whilst this does represent the majority rite, this definition also obscures evidence for alterity in the treatment of the dead: bodies may be deposited in a range of states of decomposition and articulation, dispositions and contexts. However, such practices are typically deemed as marginal or reflecting a lack of care, often not on the basis of archaeological evidence, but because they fail to align with contemporary, Western ideas of appropriate treatment for the dead.

This paper proposes a new interpretive approach which challenges dichotomous concepts of normativity and deviancy. Over two hundred burials from the central European Linearbandkeramik are studied using retrospective archaeothanatology. The results of this analysis highlight nuanced differences in funerary practice, including previously unrecognised evidence for care and intentionality in the treatment of the dead. Rather than attempting to reconstruct the social identities of the dead, these results are considered through the lens of a novel theoretical framework, referred to as *deathwork*, which centres the reconstruction of Linearbandkeramik attitudes towards death and the dead. This framework does not presume a single normative rite, and recognises the autonomy of individual survivors in responding to death. In doing so, it opens space for a more pluralistic understanding of Linearbandkeramik mortuary variability which explores, rather than rejects, its alterity.

BEYOND ANCESTOR WORSHIP? REINTERPRETING THE MOTIF OF DECAPITATION AT THE TAŞ TEPELER SITES

Katarzyna Kawoń (University of Warsaw, Poland)

The Neolithic sites of the Taş Tepeler region in Southeastern Türkiye offer a strikingly rich iconographic and archaeological record, with numerous instances of decapitated human skulls, statue heads deliberately broken off, and representations of humans or animals holding severed heads. These motifs have often been interpreted within a peaceful framework, most notably through the lens of ancestor worship—a theory long supported by finds such as the modified skulls from Jericho.

However, this paper challenges such interpretations, arguing instead for a more complex reading of decapitation in early Neolithic contexts. Drawing on the work of scholars like Michelle Bonogofsky and Alain Testart, I explore the possibility that some of these severed heads were not venerated ancestors but victims of ritual killings, symbolic acts of dominance, or warfare. Comparative analysis includes Mesopotamian practices of statue decapitation as expressions of conquest, the vulture motif as a possible totem of victorious groups, and broader

analogies with Magdalenian cannibalism, Mesolithic massacres (e.g., Ofnet), and Pre-Columbian human sacrifices.

I further explore the possibility of decapitations having a ritual or foundational function, perhaps as offerings to gods, markers of sacred power, or expressions of group identity in emergent Neolithic societies. Far from being reducible to a single explanation, these acts may reflect overlapping layers of belief, violence, and ritual, revealing a radically different Neolithic ontology—one where the human head operated as a potent object of transformation, power, and meaning.

THE IMPACT OF THE ENVIRONMENT ON NEOLITHIC SUBSISTENCE IN THE LOW VOLGA RIVER BASIN

Alexander Vybornov (Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation) and Marianna Kulkova (Samara, Russion Federation)

After the period of maximum aridization around 6200 calBC (8.2 ka calBP) in the Northern Cis-Caspian region, extreme climatic conditions persisted, influencing the lifestyle of prehistoric people. Following the regression of the Caspian Sea, the Cis-Caspian lowland was characterized by small lakes and lagoons. These freshwater lakes attracted animals and waterfowl, providing a valuable food resource for humans. Hunting saiga was preferred over hunting kulan, likely because saiga were slower and had poorer eyesight. Consequently, more effective stone points in the shape of segments were used. The sites are typically located within 10 km of a river, and fishing was a year-round activity, with perch, pike, and sturgeon being the main species caught. The earliest inhabitants constructed dwellings that were dug into the ground, up to 1 meter deep, and equipped with hearths, making them suitable for winter habitation (e.g., the Kairshak III and Baibek sites). Trees growing along the small river basins were used for construction, as evidenced by finds of polished axes and drilling products. The earliest ceramics were made from lacustrine organic clay sourced from lake deposits. Seasonal animal migrations prompted human movement, fostering relationships with inhabitants of the steppe Volga River basin (e.g., the Varfolomeevka and Algay sites), primarily through marital contacts. Without these external connections, the small local population might have died out. These contacts intensified after 5600 calBC, coinciding with increased humidity. These climatic changes favored the spread of motley grass. *Bos taurus* and Tarpan, previously confined to the steppe zone, appeared in the Northern Cis-Caspian region (e.g., the Tenteksor site). The technology and ornamentation of pottery making changed. Pottery from the Northern Cis-Caspian region is now characterized by an influx on a vessel rim and pricked decoration (e.g., the Taskhuduk site). These elements were adopted from western and northern neighbors, along with more effective stone point techniques, such as trapezoids with planed backs, which offered better aerodynamics compared to segments. These innovations continued until approximately 5200 calBP. At this time, another period of aridization and deterioration was registered, disrupting established adaptation mechanisms. The carriers of Neolithic cultures in this region could not adapt to the changing environment and were assimilated by newcomers.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NEOLITHIC NEAR EASTERN SKULL-CULT RITUAL PACKAGE

Cansu Karamurat (Aarhus University, Denmark)

The so-called "skull cult" rituals of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Near East have been argued to have played a crucial mediating role in social change and cohesion on various scales.However, investigations into the emergence and development of the practices associated with these rituals, encompassing primary and secondary burials, their relationship to domestic and public architecture, and the utilisation of symbolic objects, have largely been confined to a circumscribed geographical and chronological scope within the Near East. This study aims to elucidate the formation of the skull cult complex of practices through an expanded temporal and geographical framework, encompassing approximately 150,000 to 6,000 BC and encompassing Europe and the Near East. This broadened perspective facilitates understanding the development of the pronounced focus on specific symbolic items, particularly skulls, secondary burial practices, and their relationship to architectural contexts, within the broader framework of cultural evolution. To this end, we present a multi-feature-based statistical analysis of two hundred nineteen archaeological sites, incorporating one hundred thirty-two features primarily encompassing demographic information, bodily treatments, burial context, and grave items. The results of these analyses are subsequently discussed in conjunction with recent advancements in ancient DNA research.

DO NEOLITHIC IMAGES MEAN WHAT THEY APPEAR TO MEAN?

Christina Marangou (Greece)

In a socio-archaeological approach of Neolithic three-dimensional representations, clay miniatures' materiality in everyday life may embody real entities and facts, but also convey correlations with symbolic or imaginary realities. Some examples of the Neolithic microcosm are considered, in their morphological, postural or behavioural particularities, within their presumably associated natural and socio-cultural environment, taking account of available contextual associations. They may imply humans' states and activities, facts or performances, connections between represented animated and inanimate originals, or relations between beings, species, sexes, or genders, within social groups or communities. Neolithic entities, embodying real or fictional presences, behaviours, or situations, may infer both concrete and symbolic practices, hinting at conceivable mental images or make-believe, without excluding ambiguities. Consequently, some directions and hypotheses are suggested for the interpretation challenges of Neolithic beings and things, in the real and imagined world, acknowledging their variety and polysemy, from social reality and routine to symbolic and ritual realms.

EXCESS AND EXPENDITURE: RETHINKING THE ONTOLOGY OF THE NEOLITHIC ECONOMY

Dimitrij Mlekuž Vrhovnik (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia)

The Neolithic is conventionally portrayed as the moment when humans became economic: the age of production, agriculture, and the household, when rational management of resources replaced aimless foraging. Yet this narrative rests on a modern assumption: that economy begins in scarcity. What if, instead, the Neolithic marks the emergence of new ways of living with excess?

Drawing on Georges Bataille's notion of the general economy, the circulation of solar energy through all living forms, this paper reinterprets the Neolithic not as the origin of restricted economy, but as a transformation in how societies confronted surplus. From this perspective, agriculture, storage, and architecture appear as techniques for channeling and releasing the overflow of life rather than merely preserving it. The Neolithic was a revolution of expenditure: energy absorbed from the sun, converted through plants, animals, and labour, demanded cyclical release through feasting, burning, sacrifice, and gift.

Archaeological practices such as the construction of desert kites, the ritual fragmentation of objects, the deliberate burning of houses, and the layered growth of tell settlements materialise this logic of controlled loss. These acts reveal how destruction generated relation: surplus was shared, not hoarded; matter was returned to the cosmos through fire and decay; death itself became the ultimate gift anchoring the circulation of meaning.

In this view, economy is not a human domain but a multispecies and cosmological field of exchange. The Neolithic appears as an ontological reorganisation of excess, in which life, matter, and symbol were bound within the same energetic flow. What emerges is not an evolutionary stage or adaptive system, but a distinct mode of being, one that understood the world as a continuous movement of giving, transformation, and return.

JUST BECAUSE. ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS TO SUBSISTENCE STRATEGIES IN THE NEOLITHIC

Rajna Šošić Klindžić (University of Zagreb, Croatia)

Archaeological interpretation is deeply influenced by our mental image of the past - an image often shaped by ancient models of human development. These frameworks frequently become unexamined facts, especially in the interpretation of everyday artifacts. Ordinary objects are often taken for granted, rarely prompting deeper inquiry into the complexities of human behaviour, as if only luxurious or rare items could testify to social complexity. When complexity is acknowledged, it is often filtered through assumptions about the religious or spiritual motivations of prehistoric people. Moreover, scientific analyses of artifacts can create an illusion of objectivity and finality, reinforcing the narrative that prehistoric people were simple, rule-abiding, spiritual, guileless, and—crucially—always rational and adaptive.

However, the notion of "primitive man" is increasingly recognised as an ethnocentric projection —no more accurate than the equally problematic projection of the rational "homo economicus"

onto prehistory. Drawing on the work of economist Richard Thaler, who has demonstrated that human behaviour is often fundamentally irrational, we must reconsider our assumptions about the decision-making of prehistoric peoples. Like us, they were subject to biases, heuristics, and non-rational motivations.

We frequently overlook the fact that we are not only biologically identical to prehistoric Homo sapiens sapiens, but also share the same intellectual capacities. The archaeological record, therefore, is evidence of complex behaviour at both individual and communal levels—behaviour that was not always rational or optimally adaptive. To build new theories, we must begin to view prehistoric people as our intellectual peers, not just in grand syntheses or theoretical discussions, but at every level of archaeological interpretation.

In this paper, I revisit my previous work on Neolithic raw material procurement and "economy," exploring alternative scenarios that move beyond the cliché of purely adaptive strategies, and instead consider the full range of human behaviour—including the irrational actions.

LIVING ALONG THE SAVA RIVER: NEOLITHIC AND ENEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT IN THE KRŠKO–BREŽICE PLAIN (SE SLOVENIA)

Alenka Tomaž (University of Primorska, Slovenia) and Alenka Jovanović (Arhos d.o.o, Slovenia)

The Krško–Brežice Plain in southeastern Slovenia experienced its initial intensive settlement during the Neolithic and Eneolithic periods, a development well established in academic literature. In the past two decades, discoveries of previously unknown sites, in addition to established locations such as Ajdovska Jama near Nemška Vas, have substantially enhanced understanding of settlement patterns in this region. Rescue excavations in 2002 along the planned motorway route identified Neolithic and Eneolithic sites, including Čatež–Sredno Polje, Col near Podgračeno, Čateški Grič, and Obrežje. Further, archaeological investigations at Dolenji Leskovec – za Savo between 2007 and 2011 resulted in the discovery and excavation of another significant site along the Sava River.

This contribution presents recent evidence concerning Neolithic and Eneolithic settlement of the Krško–Brežice Plain, with a focus on two principal sites: Dolenji Leskovec – za Savo and Čatež–Sredno Polje.

SYMBOLISM AND SUBCONSCIOUS BELIEFS IN MEHRGARH: A SEMIOTIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL - EXPLORATION OF NEOLITHIC MATERIAL CULTURE

Maleeha Bukhari (Beaconhouse National University, Lahore, Pakistan)

Mehrgarh (9000–7000 BCE), one of South Asia's earliest Neolithic settlements, challenges conventional archaeological narratives that frame prehistory through modern Western epistemologies. Its material culture—pottery, figurines, and burial practices—is often interpreted through functionalist perspectives, reducing its ontological depth to economic and technological transitions. This study moves beyond such frameworks to explore the radical alterity of Mehrgarh's Neolithic ontology, analyzing how its artifacts reveal entirely different ways of perceiving and interacting with the world.

By integrating semiotics, psychoanalysis, and indigenous epistemologies, this research argues that Mehrgarh's material culture was not simply representative of belief systems but constituted an active engagement with an ontological reality distinct from modern categories. Through Barthes' semiotics and Jungian archetypal theory, Mehrgarh's visual motifs and fertility figurines are examined as non-modern sign systems—embodied symbols of cyclical temporality, ritualized materiality, and an interconnected human-nonhuman relationality that defies Western distinctions between nature and culture.

This study critically engages with the conceptual shifts required to understand the Neolithic as a realm of radical difference, resisting assimilation into contemporary knowledge structures. By embracing the specificity of Mehrgarh's material culture, it challenges dominant narratives of domestication and Neolithic "progress," instead proposing a framework that acknowledges the ontological autonomy of past ways of being.