

ACADEMIC CATEGORISATION AND HUNTER-GATHERER PRACTICES

Studies of the transition from hunter-gatherers to farmers raise a number of intriguing issues related to the categorisation of communities, be they prehistoric, ethnographic or academic. The discovery of the many large ritual enclosures at Göbekli Tepe¹ in Southeastern Turkey pre-dating farming and domestication was a huge surprise also to the academic community. The questions are: why was it such a surprise, and what may be learned from this?

Revisiting Marshall Sahlins' *Stone Age Economics* (1972²) and contemporary publications by Richard Lee (notably *Man the Hunter*³) and Lewis Binford, Osvaldo Raggio⁴ contemplates how this research in the late 1960s and -70s changed our perceptions of the development from hunter to farmer. These publications initiated a remarkable cross-disciplinary re-orientation in the recognition of the social and economic situation and capacities amongst hunter-gatherers. The traditional evolutionary view had portrayed early and contemporary foraging communities as intellectually, socially and economically inferior, albeit not completely without potential for innovative developments, which in a few unique cases led to development and the assumed higher living standard achieved through farming and herding. The new neo-evolutionary perspective acknowledged hunter-gatherers as different, but on an equal basis with any other economic way of life, and in some cases emphasized some arguable advantages of this life style, such as greater social equality and fewer work hours needed to meet basic subsistence requirements. Since then, research has confirmed that domestication was not the invention of a single particularly gifted individual or society, but has taken place independently many times and many places⁵, yet another recognition of the general developmental potential in these groups.

While hunter-gathers and farmers are now considered equals in ethically and politically correct models and evolutionary schemes, they are however, still set apart from farmers, herders, chiefdoms and states in almost all such categorising attempts. Beyond archaeology and anthropology there is limited knowledge of hunter-gatherers and rather conservative perceptions of these societies are often presented in grand theories of human evolution. More worrying is perhaps the fact even scholars researching hunters and farmers tend to discriminate the former by continuing this categorisation and the many associated explicit and implicit defining elements. As a result a different set of research topics

has seemed appropriate for foragers, a fact perhaps most easily demonstrated for archaeology. Until the turn of the millennium, most studies of hunter-fisher groups (Mesolithic or later) concentrated on subsistence and technology, and only in the last two decades has a broader suite of studies investigating social and ritual aspects emerged⁶. While this may be argued to be due to the often more limited archaeological remains from hunter-gatherers, recent publications demonstrate that new theoretical perspectives and new approaches does allow a much wider study of early pre-farming groups.

In the same way that there is a list of defining criteria for archaeological and historical societies to be accepted as states, there is a list of traits strongly associated with hunter-gatherers: they are small-scale nomadic peoples organised in bands which follow certain patterns of dispersal and aggregation, they are egalitarian, and individual property is limited⁷. In addition it is generally accepted that any work division is based on gender and age only, that their dwellings and other structures are ephemeral, and that they do not invest in the environment as farmers or herders do. However, some groups practice a degree of delayed-return economy⁸, as food may be collected and stored. Typically their cosmology is considered associated with animism and/or shamanism. While such a list may appear unproblematic at first glance, it also boxes in these societies and render understanding of development from one category to another difficult.

What hunters do: economic organisation

The most basic criterion for distinguishing between hunters and farmers is their economy, which may be perceived as a very straightforward and unproblematic issue. However, as both archaeologists and anthropologists are aware matters are more complicated than that. For one thing distinguishing between wild and domestic species in a distant past is challenging, and new research has lead to some revision of the earliest dates⁹. More importantly, some scholars argue that «humans were actively modifying local ecosystems and manipulating biotic communities»¹⁰ at least a thousand years before accepted morphological traits associated with domestication is documented, and that intensive exploitation of selected resources may be an ancient practice. We also know that many hunter-gatherer-fishers (past and present) do in fact intervene in their environment, albeit in different ways than agriculturalists and herders. They may construct and maintain pit falls or fences to hunt large mammals, they may build contraptions of wood or stone

to catch (and keep) fish, they may consciously burn patches of grassland to encourage new growth¹¹, and they keep dogs for hunting and to raise alarm and ward off predators. As a caveat, it should be noted that at present we know little about when such intervening practices started or about their extent. It is possible that the scale of such environmental management increased with later interaction with farmers, as a new perception of interrelationship with the surroundings emerged¹². On the other hand there are indications that in many cases these practices were long-term stable elements in hunter-gatherer practices over centuries or millennia, in other words, they do not represent a transitional stage between foraging and farming¹³. While we know that initial cultivation did lead to many later social and economic developments, it is less clear whether the concrete practice of sowing and harvesting a small amount of grain is in itself significantly different from other practices more common amongst hunter-gatherers to be such a key criterion in our categorisations. With our retrospective view, do we perhaps overemphasize the uniqueness of agriculture?

Göbekli Tepe certainly differs dramatically from constructions otherwise known from animistic and shamanistic societies. However, prehistoric religion is not – yet – a major theme in archaeology. Due to the long prevailing focus on economy and adaption to the environment, it is as good as absent in hunter-gatherer archaeology apart from rock art studies. Here there is an overemphasis on ethnographic and historical information (and retrospective analogy), which again may lead to negligence of prehistoric diversity and practices. Frankly our knowledge of late glacial ritual practices in the Middle East is very limited.

It is clear that these enclosures at Göbekli Tepe could not have been built by a handful of persons, and would therefore have required aggregation of a larger group of people for some time. In principle these could have been many smaller nomadic bands, exploiting separate areas some distance away, but meeting up at particular times of year. There is no reason to assume that the building process was continued all year round, in fact, as argued below, it is more likely to have been a prolonged process over many years. Dispersal and aggregation is a very common feature amongst hunter-gatherers, often linked to seasonal exploitation of specific resources. The reason for aggregation may be economic, such as collaboration in hunting or simply meeting at locations with seasonal plentiful resources, or predominantly social and cultural. It certainly requires either plentiful resources at the location for aggregation or previous collection and storage of supplies.

Storage is not an uncommon phenomenon amongst hunter-gatherers¹⁴, particularly where there is marked seasonal variation in resource availability. One may distinguish between generalists or specialists at each end of a continuum, where specialists not only exploit a limited number of resources more intensively, but as a result of this often develop specialist equipment or tools to help them pursue the selected species. Needless to say, specialisation also affects settlement and mobility patterns, as well as work organisation, either of the hunting/fishing/gathering itself or of the later processing of the catch/harvest.

With regard to work division, Raggio perceives the societies that constructed Göbekli Tepe as stratified with non-food specialists¹⁵. However, there is no reason to assume a priori that the individuals building at the site did not contribute fully to the subsistence in the group. It is likely that the construction took place in periods where they could either live on stored food, or where resources in the vicinity were so plentiful that little time was needed to provide for the group (although all those not directly involved in building, may have been occupied with processing the food). No doubt some individuals had particular roles in the construction, or in the ritual activities that followed, but this need not have been their main position in the group, nor a permanent one.

The requirements for Göbekli Tepe with regard to economic organisation and work division to allow food and work force time all link in with what we know from other archaeological and ethnographic information on hunter-gatherers, and do not set the Göbekli Tepe groups apart from others. But what were the motivations for the monumental constructions?

Aggregation: communal activities or rituals?

Aggregation in hunter-gatherer societies is not tied to subsistence patterns only, but also to many other important activities, such as gift exchange, information exchange, finding partners, risk reducing networking, games and rituals¹⁶. It has long been argued by some (and from very different theoretical perspectives) that factors such as feasting and surplus accumulation may have been the most significant as drivers of the development of full scale farming societies¹⁷. Without commenting directly on that debate, there are other crucial activities that may have been as significant for the participants. Not surprising, one of the most publicised elements at Göbekli Tepe are the representations of humans and animals. However, parts of the figures on the

large T-shaped pillars were hidden by ring walls or benches¹⁸. There is clear evidence that pillars were reused in such a way that some figures were hidden, and that figures were removed or replaced with others¹⁹. Another fascinating aspect of Göbekli Tepe is that the enclosures were filled in or buried not long after their construction, certainly within the same archaeological period. The large number of structures, the re-building of structures, the destruction of parts and the final filling of the enclosures, all indicate that rituals within the enclosures were just one element of a series of repeated practices at the site. These repetitive practices, the processes of building, re-building and destroying suggest that collaborative, manual work were such an important element of Göbekli Tepe, that continued ritual use of the first structure did not suffice. Similar observations have been made for other prehistoric sites based on ethnographic evidence. Inspired by previous Neolithic research Colin Richards argues that for some monuments the long term processes of construction may have been the primary social focus²⁰. Importantly he also points out (with references to John Barretts work²¹) that social differentiation may be an outcome rather than a prerequisite for such labour intensive projects. This is clearly in line with interpretations of the emergence of farming that favours socio-economic factors.

Domestication and agriculture emerged separately at least 10 different places, demonstrating that such a transition is not unique and suggesting that there are one or more inherent elements in human hunter-gatherer societies that may lead to this shift. It seems that there must be a variety of commitments and investments, be they social or economic, which in these cases bind communities to certain practices and organizational patterns, and accelerate the development. But for some reason similar practices and patterns either do not appear or do not accelerate in other societies. What are the constraints and the catalysts?

Many of the socio-economic processes required for monumental constructions such as Göbekli Tepe may be found in hunter-gatherer societies. However, the categorization of pre-industrial societies and broad evolutionary stages, that continues despite the re-orientation initiated by Sahlins, Lee and Binford, tends to direct our attention towards distinct and somewhat stereotyped ways of life, and takes the focus away from diversity and series of unfolding socio-cultural choices. While this to some extent may have caused the discovery of Göbekli Tepe to surprise the world, there can be no doubt that the site was part of a unique, unparalleled development. Gaydarska has recently cautioned scholars studying ancient cities to distinguish between factors behind the emergence of pioneering cities and cities that appear and function in a realm where an urban way of life is recurrent experience²². Similarly, we may

have to accept a more particularistic interpretation of the monumental structures at Göbekli Tepe, and similar first-time occurrences of a variety of phenomena.

As the above emphasizes, a narrow focus on distinguishing farmers from hunters easily leaves us with two categorical boxes, which is unhelpful for the investigation of human development. The accepted criteria for foraging communities may restrict our research questions and lead us to underestimate practices amongst hunter-gatherers. If we acknowledge instead the inherent potential for driving change that many foraging practices entail, we re-direct the focus to identifying processes and socio-economic aspects that either constrain or accelerate major developments.

Academic disciplines and sibling rivalry

While at times a helpful heuristic device the categorization of prehistoric or ethnographic societies and their implicit association with evolutionary stages in many circumstances turns out to have a delimiting effect on our understanding of human diversity and development. The very uniform categorization of academic disciplines may unfortunately have a similar negative effect. It is appropriate to term archaeology, anthropology and history sister disciplines. But as so often amongst siblings there is frequently a good deal of bickering and competition going on, and often a lack of appreciation of qualities in the sibling. In the present case, discussions typically concentrate on the quality, objectiveness and potential of the source material (texts, material culture, participatory observation). The current political and financial climate generally has negative effects for the humanities and related disciplines, and this sharpens competition at the institutional level. In addition archaeology has recently turned to archaeological science and collaboration with natural sciences. While this has resulted in many exciting new results, it should not let us neglect the many mutual interests between disciplines in the humanities and social sciences such as (modern) history, linguistics, religious studies, sociology, and human geography to name a few. As for archaeology, anthropology and history, they share a fundamental interest in human diversity and development in the widest sense, and the variation in sources and temporal perspectives should be explored as complementary rather than competitive approaches. Prehistoric archaeologists would certainly benefit looking beyond the excavation trenches and should more frequently aspire to contribute to wider academic debates. This would necessarily include recognition of

the insights other disciplines can provide also to the understanding of early human societies. And perhaps disciplines working predominantly with modern societies may benefit from the insights gained from studying economy and organization in a diversity of societies and in a real long-term perspective. Academic categorization of disciplines and sibling rivalry is not clearly helpful in advancing academic knowledge.

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Notes

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¹⁸ SCHMIDT, *A Stone Age Sanctuary* cit., e.g. pp. 127, 140, 165-7.

¹⁹ Ivi, pp. 127, 247.

²⁰ C. RICHARDS, *Interpreting Stone Circles*, in ID. (ed.), *Building the Great Stone Circles of the North*, Oxford 2013, pp. 2-30.

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²² B. GAYDARSKA, *The City is Dead! Long live the City!*, in «Norwegian Archaeological Review», 49 (2016), in press.