

## BOOK REVIEW

**Kurt J. Gron, Lasse Sørensen and Peter Rowley-Conwy (eds.) *Farmers at the Frontier. A Pan-European Perspective on Neolithisation.* Oxbow books, Oxford/Philadelphia, 2020, Pp. 464. ISBN 9781789251401**

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Early farming is one of the central themes in archaeology, perhaps not so much in itself as subsistence practice, but because of the many and diverse consequences to humans and environments that it has been attributed. This is not the least the case in European archaeology. In this new volume primacy is put on the earliest farming in order to “(..) better understand the individual factors, processes and actors involved in Neolithisation” (p.1). How was agriculture spread, what was spread, and what form did it take?

Secondary adoption of agriculture, i.e. outside the primary centres of origin, it is stated, allows for active choice and awareness among the individuals involved, immigrants or indigenous to an area. A time ‘zone of variability’ (with reference to Price and Bar-Yosef, 2011) or period of negotiation, exploration and audition of the agricultural way of life is suggested to be relevant not only to understand the processes in primary centres, but also in secondary context Europe. This allows for different durations and intensities of the transition into Neolithic communities in various regions. In the Introduction (p. 3) Gron, Sørensen and Rowley-Conwy suggest that the Early Neolithic is coming to an end when we see a widespread anthropomorphic alteration of the landscape, the final abandonment of foraging sites of Mesolithic character, and the commencement of monumental or communal construction. Throughout the volume, focus is put on the first elements suggesting farming activity, including landscape management. Relatively little can be found on farmer – forager relationships, and monumental or communal constructions are hardly mentioned.

The volume consists of twenty individual chapters in addition to the Introduction and a short Conclusion. The chapters include synthetic regional overviews, local analyses, and site-specific reports. They are ordered in a roughly south – north sequence, with an additional underlying question gradually turning from “when” to “was there” a Neolithisation, the latter explicitly critically discussed for Scandinavia by Prescott (Chapter 18). All chapters lean heavily on new and/or improved scientific methods, in particular stable isotope analyses, and radiocarbon dating and modelling. Several present macrofossil and zooarchaeological studies and some include results from aDNA analyses on animals, plants and/or humans. The many re-evaluations of existing zooarchaeological and macrofossil assemblages, and activation of

existing grey literature, is commendable. Traditional archaeological material is given relatively little attention. The 'scientific turn' is mirrored in the illustrations, which are mostly distribution maps at different scales and various graphical presentations of metrical characteristics. Object illustrations are almost exclusively of animal bones and teeth.

From the book subtitle, it becomes clear that the volume aims at providing a pan-European perspective. There are, however, huge geographical gaps (most of central and western Europe) at the same time as some regions – Scandinavia in particular (chapters 14-18) – are well covered. Before I started to read, to me the book title 'Farmers at the Frontier' (in singular) suggested a volume of carefully selected examples of geographically extreme and climatic marginal agriculture. The geographical unbalance apparent in the content list, with the lack of high altitude central European examples yet a number of papers on the Mediterranean (chapters 2-8), was surprising. A much more dynamic frontier understanding is, however, presented in the first chapter by Ivanova, of a European continent in general representing a marginal environment to the first husbandry animals and cultivates we associate with farming.

In Chapter 2, a well composed multi-proxy study by Becdelièvre, Jovanović, Hofmanová, Goude and Stefanović brings together results from stable isotope analyses from animals and humans, human aDNA, radiocarbon dates and archaeological burial material to investigate how generations of Mesolithic foragers and Neolithic immigrant farmers interacted locally. It is shown that initial agriculture on a local level is not followed by gradual transition to farming but rather the contrary. This is pointed out also in several of the following chapters, and becomes to me one of the main contributions of the volume. Even more thought provoking is the demonstration of the high degree of individual articulations of diet (subsistence) and burial costume ('culture') combinations across and within generations, on a local and regional level. These two first chapters bring up an overwhelming and inspiring complexity and set the stage for the rest of the volume. The remaining chapters follow up on demonstrating how the people involved, immigrants or indigenous, needed to be flexible, able and willing to adjust farming subsistence technologies to local contexts.

Access to large and new data sets and analyses varies between the areas discussed, and this clearly constrains some of the interpretations, but also limits comparison between regions. The general mental template seems to be the 'farm' as a settled unit, but rock shelters with domestic animal and plant remains challenge uniformity with surroundings often topographically marginal for agriculture (Chapters 4 – 7). The extremely small numbers of identified domestic animal bones and cultivated crops on which early farming is based in all the studies call for critical consideration of representativity and status of contexts and site types. Chapters in books like this are typically read separately. A reader of the full volume is presented with an interesting body of examples which repeatedly seem to identify recurrent, separate farming episodes and not the least high local variation in processes leading up to established farming societies in Europe. Most chapters focus on natural conditions for farming. Glørstad, Solheim and Persson's (Chapter 17) reminder of the importance of historical trajectories is a welcome alternative. The highly various 'frontier' farming characteristics presented on regional and local levels should make this book relevant for other

than agriculture and husbandry studies of landscape and resource management. The variations demonstrate complexities in dynamics facilitating or hampering not only farming, but potentially all introductions of new technology, subsistence, or social regulation. However, a particular potential is undeveloped, which I will return to below.

Articulations of a larger cultural or archaeological phenomenon at 'frontiers' or outskirts may hold information on its essential qualities or characteristics. These may be missed out in studying 'core' or primary areas, due to richer material with high spatial and temporal complexity. At the outskirts, a more restricted material is articulated within a different historical trajectory setting. Here 'essences' may be easier to identify. Despite the large variation in early farming settings, several of the studies conclude with close integrations of crop and animal husbandry. Could this represent an 'essence' in early farming?

The volume is surprisingly devoid of references to the recent 'animal turn' in social sciences and humanities, archaeology included (i.e. Ingold, 2000; Oma, 2019). A number of human – animal relationships included in live animal tenure are hinted at, such as facilitating wild – domestic animal interbreeding, moving individual and herds by boat, species-specific tenure, including dairying, shepherding and winter sheltering, and age and sex differentiated management. All indicate insight into animal life worlds, both domestic and wild. Domestic animals seem for a long period of time to have been in critically low numbers. Diseases, escaping, inbreed and killing and natural death of individuals threatened the survival of local animal communities. The importance of wild animals is at the same time in this volume generally stated to be low. This is very surprising, given that they probably provided to the first farmers not only meat, but also other vital resources, hide in particular, without diminishing their small herd of domesticated animals. Critical evaluation of the representativity of zooarchaeological data and of their find contexts must remain an important part of early farming studies in Europe.

In the Introduction outset, the unfamiliarity in various encounters and relationships in which the first farmers in Europe found themselves is pointed out, be it with techniques, knowledge or traditions, landscape use or plant and animal relationships. It is mentioned in some of the chapters that activities and processes associated with agriculture are found in forager communities. Bringing (wild) animals to unfamiliar landscapes is one of them. Moving animals across sea has been practiced in Mesolithic Europe, as pointed out by Smyth, McClatchie and Warren on Ireland (Chapter 20). Others are keeping domesticated dogs, conscious vegetation altering and landscape shaping. Forager human – plant relationships include wood burning in order to stimulate growth of particular plants, and lithic resource extraction from specific outcrops add to an array of active management of local environments by Mesolithic hunter-gatherers. Given this, uptake and spread of elements of agriculture into new landscapes need not be as 'foreign' as often anticipated. I would have expected interesting and stimulating new contributions on both frontier farming and human – animal (and plant) relationships if the two fields were actively combined in the book.

In conclusion and given the above, I am not surprised that keeping foreign animals and growing non-local plants was spread in Europe, by immigrants and/or into Mesolithic communities. Having read the volume I am, however, still left without a good answer as to

why agriculture was maintained in the diverse and 'frontier' landscapes. I believe, in line with the editors in the Conclusion, that "The ultimate undercurrent is the power of demographics: (..)" (p. 446). In coming to grip with early farming in Europe I believe, however, population size considerations cannot not be restricted to people, but need to include animals and plants.

### *References*

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