

The Archaeology of People: Dimensions of Neolithic life

Alasdair Whittle. 2003.

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Reviewed by Janine Ochoa

I was intuitively drawn to this book mainly because of my preconceived notion of what it was all about. The table of contents showed deceptively simple chapter titles: *The daily round*, *What animals were like*, *Lives*, etc. "Deceptively simple" because in archaeology, the seemingly simplest and most basic circumstances in which people existed are actually the ones that can be very hard to understand such that theorists invent and combine all these obscure concepts to explain them. But one thing that struck me really was the first chapter's title: *Being there*. "There" for this book pertains to the Neolithic of Europe: from the Great Hungarian Plain to the Alpine forelands and southern Britain; and from the sixth to the fourth millennium BC. With this phrase, one immediately gets the feeling that a phenomenology of the European Neolithic will unfold in the next pages. True enough, Whittle delivers an interesting phenomenological narrative, and more. He expands on the perspectives of *dwelling* and the *taskscape* to tackle key points about bodies and embodiment, tasks and movement, interactions and identities, and memory and remembering.

Whittle proposes his framework in the first chapter, first by reviewing various concepts like structure, agency and culture, and then exposing the difficulties and concerns that such ideas pose in analysing the archaeological record. He tries to highlight the explanatory strengths of such concepts and draws out the points of critique implicit in each. These he does to show how these concepts could be expanded or broken down in order to develop our understanding of what it was like *being there* and "what it meant to be an individual in the past."

Indeed what could it have been like being there? For Whittle, this phrase encompasses a variety of concepts: socialities, identities, consciousness, and routines, among others. In the process of his discussions about *being there*,

the author accentuates on the one hand cyclicity, routines, and stability, and on the other hand underscores diversity, ephemerality and ultimately, change.

Whittle shows that there is more to the archaeological record than directed models of change, economic and ecological paradigms, or single site reconstructions. Both rare and redundant archaeological finds, as well as the various scales and spheres of interaction, suggest the nitty-gritties of life and of living in a specific temporal landscape. Life must have been a combination of various routines that were entrenched in peoples' beliefs and consciousness. Regular tasks and movements would have been means of socializing and interacting with others, as well as a way of engaging with and understanding the world. The author provides many examples of how in Ingold's (1996) words "humans are enmeshed...like other creatures in an active, practical and perceptual engagement with constituents of the dwelt-in world." Such examples include: tethered mobility involving hunting and herding; cereal cultivation, from clearance of the land and planting to harvesting and consumption; and procurement and exchange of lithic materials like cores, axes and adzes.

In all of these tasks, the body is a primary focus and it is not just treated as an object to be identified by age and sex. Humans move about all the time and they experience and sense the world in various ways. A general critique of current treatments of the human body has been the implied isomorphism of bodies and bodily experience. Whittle emphasizes the many-sidedness of movements and activities, and provides depictions of oriented, aged, consigned, and sometimes gendered individuals. But he also admits that from here, we can only guess at the individual variation that could have been manifested as people moved about and worked in their taskscape.

In the third chapter, the author tries to analyse "difficult individuals." True, archaeological individuals and past peoples' notions of individualism can often be hard to place and construe. It is one thing to say that people were diverse, but it is another thing to show exactly how definitions and senses of being an individual varied and differed. Through a series of ethnographic and archaeological illustrations, Whittle convincingly demonstrates the actuality of multiple identities. He analyses anthropomorphic figurines,

burials, households and longhouses, and comes out with the striking conclusion that the sharpest definition of the individual came in the Early Copper Age. In the next chapter, Whittle also correlates the importance of animals in the construction of identity. Animals are said to be instrumental in people's understanding of their world. One prominent example is his examination of how cattle are not just good to eat but are also good to keep and think with.

Whittle also devotes a whole chapter on "Looking back." He gives examples of the varied expressions of selective and creative remembering. Remembering is apparently manifested in the choice of settlements, in portal dolmens and long barrows, in the movement of *Spondylus* shells, and of course in myth and cosmology.

Now all of these discussions on identities, socialities and such come full circle in the chapter on "Lives." Life, in the Heideggerian sense of *being-in-the-world*, can be significantly instrumental to our understanding of identities and existences of peoples of the past. Indeed, using it involves alternately and skillfully zooming into the tiniest details and taking a step back to see larger scales of interpretation. There may be limits to what archaeologists can infer and interpret but there are more paths that can be explored, and this is one of them.

All in all, Whittle paints a multidimensional picture of past existences. At some point though, one can get lost in all these depictions of diversity and complexity, and in the frequent shift of scales and settings. Whittle's focus on the variety, messiness and fluidity of existences echoes his style of writing: his insightful narrative flows smoothly yet there is an ironic quality of neat disarray to it. Thankfully though, the author sets things in order with succinct summaries in his chapter introductions and conclusions.

Whittle's brand of synthesis deliberately dispenses of conventional means of data presentation like maps, tables or chronologies that would help the novice reader. In fact, the reader has to be equipped with a working knowledge of Neolithic Europe to place and wholly understand the theoretical discussions in their archaeological contexts.

One important point that I would like to raise though concerns the issue of gender. Considering that Whittle extensively discusses identities, his reflections on gender are not as expansive as one might expect. When he does mention gender, more often than not he turns to ethnographic accounts. One of the more notable statements that Whittle makes about gender relations is about his comparison of male and female lifestyles based on musculoskeletal stress marks on adult bones found in West Kennet. He admits that there is "very little [that we know] about gender-based divisions of labour in the Neolithic" (p. 43). This shortcoming is apparently characteristic of a considerable bulk of the archaeological literature. The concept of gender remains under-theorised, and in many cases, Whittle comments on it only as a byproduct of other topics. Thankfully, Whittle does not assert traditional gender-artifact linkages; he even criticizes, albeit fleetingly, the notion that pots and potting correlate to females. Nonetheless, he does articulate *a priori* expectations of the activities of males and females. He mentions the traditional depiction of dynamic men versus static women in his citation of public body postures among the Foi (p.29). Disturbingly, he further asks whether these dichotomous stances can be reflected in body postures seen in ancient graves.

Moreover, in his quotation of the ethnography of the Kabyle (p.32, 34), Whittle underscores the normative domestic-public dichotomy. He hints in several instances that men engage in wider-ranging activities while women (only?) perform activities in the domestic sphere. He writes: "let us suppose that animal herding and flint procurement were the responsibility principally of males" (p.142). And in the same paragraph: "Modest amounts of flint were procured at great distances...perhaps chiefly by men." Here are specific *a priori* statements for which Whittle does not provide any clear justification. There is nothing inherently incorrect in saying that men hunted or that women gathered or gardened. But in Whittle's case, the type of gender specificity he employs only promotes gender exclusivity rather than inclusivity (Conkey and Spector 1984).

All in all, although Whittle comments about gender relations and tries to make women visible, he still unwittingly promotes the gender mythology that substantiates culture-specific beliefs of the present (ibid.).

This is not to put too much blame on the author. It can be said that perhaps in this particular discourse, it is not Whittle but other authors that could suggest better "ways forward."

Despite this critique, the author does succeed in his self-proscribed attempt to suggest ways forward. He succinctly and elaborately provides a rich analysis of the archaeology of the peoples of the European Neolithic. He demonstrates the multiple dimensions and textures of existences and identities while avoiding compartmentalisation and programmatic pronouncements. Furthermore, he successfully combines different scales of interpretation to allow for his synthesis. And lastly, his numerous ethnographic and archaeological examples make this remote past not so remote, such that somehow one gets a distinct feel of how it was *being there*.

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