3 The Neolithic in Greece

In this chapter I will treat the Neolithic period in the land occupied by the Modern Greek state.[1] The Neolithic period represents the era from the introduction of agriculture and sedentism into Greece up to the appearance of the first use of bronze (ca. 6800–3200 BCE).[2] Its earliest phase in Greece is referred to as aceramic or prepottery (ca. 6800–6500 BCE) because agriculture and sedentism was evident before the invention of pottery. The introduction of these two features of the Neolithic into Greece is not well understood and contentious, with some arguments for its origins in the Near East (Ammerman and Cavali-Sforza 1984; Childe 1983; Perles 2001) and others for a more indigenous development (Reingruber 2011; Séfériadès 2007). In my presentation of the Neolithic I focus on households and turn to the issue of possible social structure between households.

Yet even though there is uncertainty as to the origin of Neolithic culture in Greece, there are some general characteristics of the period as a whole which stand out. The two most salient are that of agriculture, that is, domesticated plants and animals, and sedentary lifestyles. The plants which were domesticated included beans, peas, bitter vetch, lentils, emmer wheat, einkorn wheat, and barley. Domesticated animals were sheep, goats, pigs, and some cattle. We have good examples of Neolithic settlements on rich agricultural lands, such as those in Thessaly. But Neolithic peoples also settled in more marginal territory. Indeed, except for parts of Thessaly, a great deal of Greece is made up of hard soils with low water tables. The introduction of the agricultural practices of scratch or ard plowing with draft animals, and raising sheep for wool, rather than meat, allowed Neolithic Greeks to occupy these marginal territories. The settlement density in these areas was not great, however, and the most common type of settlement was isolated farms or small hamlets.

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[1] I am not treating the Neolithic in the Cyclades in any way, but to mention connections between the Cyclades and the mainland in the Mesolithic and Neolithic (Melos especially). It is often hard to separate the Neolithic from the early Bronze Age in Cyclades, and I will pick up Cycladic cultures in the next chapter. Those interested in the Cycladic Neolithic are advised to read the first few chapters in Broodbank (2002).

[2] The Neolithic is divided into Early, Middle, Late, and Final Neolithic periods. Information on the Final Neolithic is spotty, and I am choosing to concentrate on the first three Neolithic phases, rather than include the Final Neolithic into the discussion. I am also restricting my treatment of the Neolithic to the mainland, with minor references to Crete. I am not treating the Neolithic of the Cyclades, preferring to begin discussion of settlement there in the Early Bronze Age.

Box 1 Caves Can Be Important: Franchthi Cave

Franchthi cave (Figure 3.1) is an important archaeological site which provides a continuous record of occupation in Greece from ca. 22,000 to 5000 BP (Before Present: 1950 CE). The cave offered analyzable stratigraphy up to 11 m deep. Located on the Argolid Gulf, the cave was excavated continuously from 1967 to 1976, by teams led by Thomas Jacobsen from the University of Indiana (Jacobsen 1976, 1981). Although now the mouth of the cave almost touches the Mediterranean, it was once at least 12 km from the coast.

The cave tells us something about the connection between the Neolithic and earlier cultures in Greece. The Mesolithic period (10,300–8000 BP), right before the Neolithic, contains evidence that the cave was a base camp for hunter and gatherers. There were several burials, one was of a twenty-five-year-old male, who apparently died of blows to his forehead, although

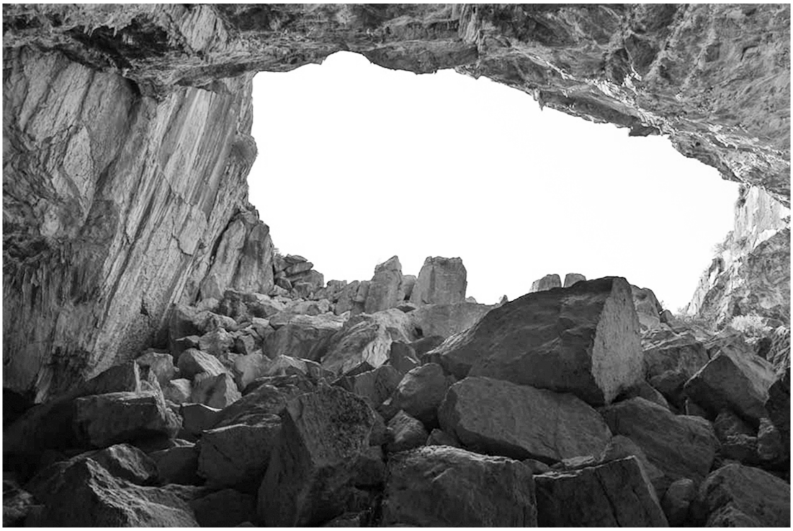


Figure 3.1 Franchthi cave. (From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franchthi_Cave, WP:CC BY-SA; accessed 7/20/2018.)

Box 1 (*cont.*)

there is additional evidence that he suffered from malaria. The appearance of fish bones and some obsidian from the island of Melos shows that they were utilizing marine resources. This is also the period when we first see ground stone tools, millstones from the Saronic Gulf. This indicates the probable processing of wild grains.

In the Early Neolithic (8000–7000 BP) the cave holds clear evidence of the advent of agriculture. We now have bones from domesticated sheep and goats; evidence of barley, wheat, and lentils; grinding stones; and sickle pieces. This is also the first appearance of pottery, but its rather fragile nature and shape may well indicate that it was used more for display than any utilitarian function (Vitelli 1993). This is also the period when we have our first example of architecture. In front of the mouth of the cave several walls and associated rooms have been excavated (Wilkinson and Duhon 1990). The architecture probably represents the house and associated buildings, and the cave is now just adjunct space to the community. There is some evidence that the cave had actually become a pen for animals.

The middle Neolithic (7000–6500 BP) saw continued development of the new elements which appeared at Franchthi in the Early Neolithic. The range of pottery increases, with strong evidence that it was used for purposes such as feasting and storage. There are also some pots which best fit our description of coarse ware cooking pots, indicating an important change the way in which food was prepared.

After this period the occupation of the cave basically comes to a halt.

For a more detailed overview, see Vitelli (1993, 1995).

Tell Sites

In more productive regions, such as Thessaly and Greek Macedonia, the settlement system was different, with several tell, or archaeological mound, sites (Figure 3.2). Three stand out: Nea Nikomedeia (Pyke 1993, 1996; Rodden 1962, 1965, 1996; Wardle 1996) in Greek Macedonia, and Dhimini (Figure 3.3) (Chourmouziadis 1979) and Sesklo (Figure 3.4) (Tsountas 1908) in Thessaly. Although a great deal of the data from their excavations has yet to be published, what we possess can help us gain an idea of what life was like in communities in the Greek Neolithic. Their architecture and artifacts give us a window into their social structure.

One of the most important observations is that social institutions, religious, crafts producing, burial, etc. in these communities were strongly embedded in the household, which was the basic unit of social organization (the best treatment of the household is Souvatzi 2008). It is important to realize that the term “household” does not equate with that of family. Households were composed of individuals who ate and slept in the same house and who were economically tied to one another. It does not mean that all members of the household were related by kinship. Various individuals such as slaves, independent retainers, economic partners, and others could and probably did occupy positions within the household. The concept of the house probably held some special significance in some communities at least, as witnessed by what appear to be ancient house models (examples are numerous; see references in Boggard and Halstead 2015). Household units varied in size from those which would occupy one or two rooms to larger, multiroomed structures which were set apart from the rest of the community's housing (Kotsakis 2006; Kotsos and Urem-Kotsou 2006). There was little spatial differentiation within the houses, however, which indicates that the household was not strongly articulated by gender, age, or various functions. That is, all activities took place in the same or closely adjacent areas of the house.

There were various institutions contained within the household. Some were associated with crafts production. Evidence for craft production is found within the space of the household, but there is also some evidence that craft production was shared by different households as well. Various artifacts associated with craft production were located in space which was shared by different households.

The household was apparently the center for institutions which incorporated ritual practice as well. These ritual contexts must have included some sort of feasting activity. Recent arguments (Halstead and Isaakidou 2011), which build on an innovative analysis of serving ware and social position (Haggis 2007), point to the fact that some of these feasts could have accommodated a large number of participants and that the serving ware, which lacks special vessels such as pitchers, indicates that there was little elaborated distinction between those involved in the feasts themselves. The presence of pitchers, which would have specifically pointed to a distinction between host and guest, was missing in Neolithic communities. Neolithic feasting appears to have taken place without preestablished asymmetrical relationships. These ritual feasting contexts appear in various sites and forms. There is some evidence for a possible altar at the sites of Achilleon (Gimbutas 1974) and Prodromos (Chourmouziadis 1971).

The household also incorporated funeral rituals as there are several examples of intramural burial at settlements such as Dhimini. We lack strong evidence of extra-household funeral behavior, which suggests that funerals, because they were contained within the household, might not have been an important means of social integration outside the

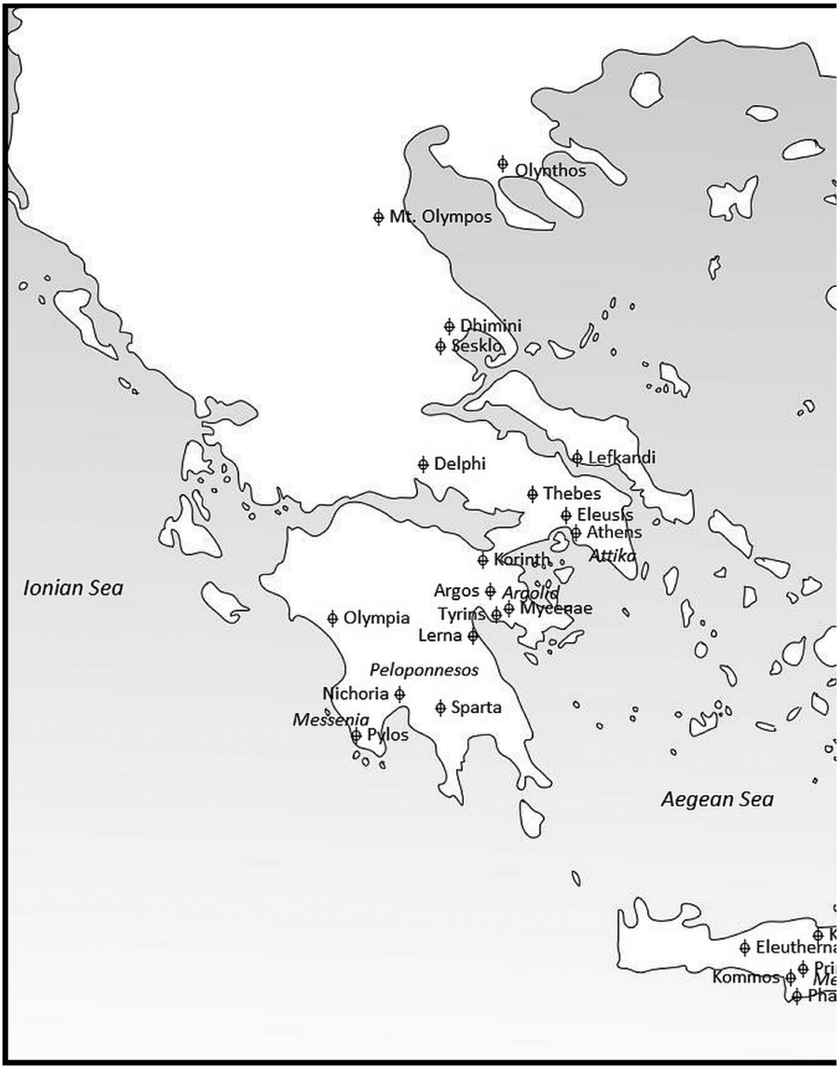
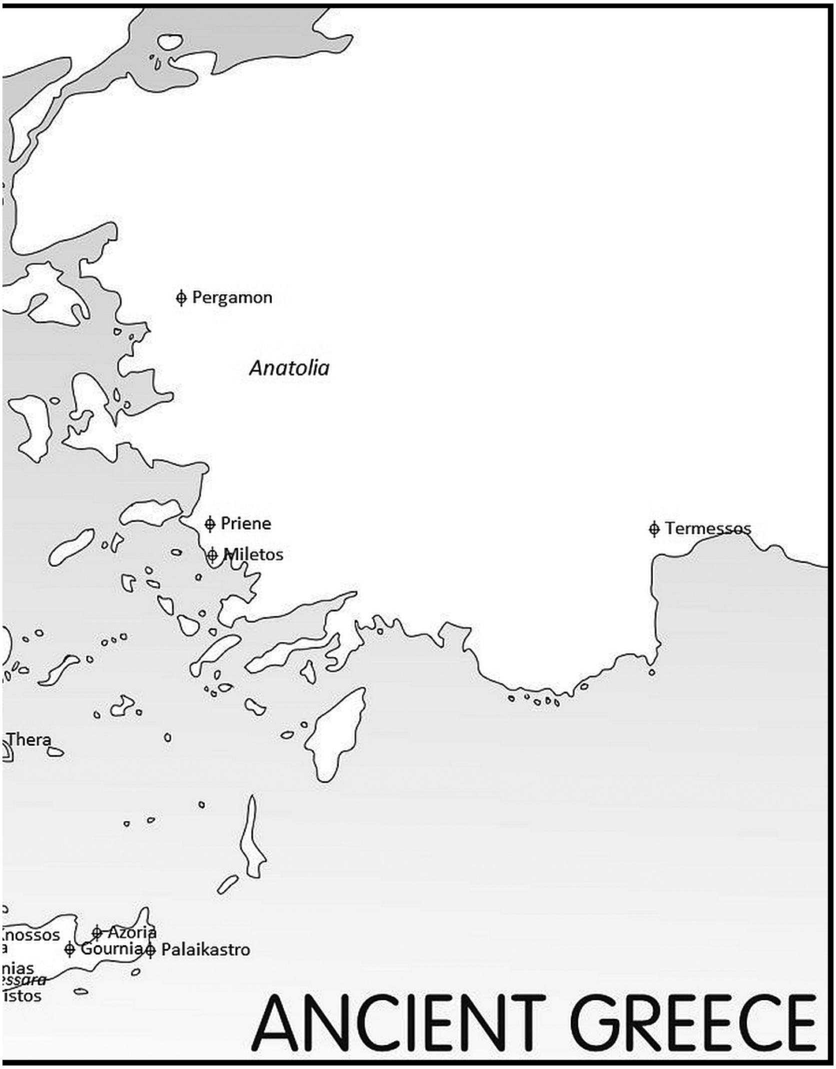

Olynthos
Mt. Olympos
Dhimini
Sesklo
Delphi
Lefkandi
Thebes
Eleusis
Athens
Attika
Korinth
Ionian Sea
Argos
Argolid
Olympia
Tyrins
Mycenae
Lerna
Peloponnesos
Nichoria
Messenia
Pylos
Sparta
Aegean Sea
K
Eleuthern
Kommos
Pri
Me
Pha

Figure 3.2 Map of Greece with major sites mentioned in the text.

household itself. In general, there was little elaboration of the funeral institutional context. Four different types of funeral are seen in the archaeological record: intramural, pit, disarticulated and scattered, and some sort of funerary complex (Souvatzi 2008: 186–93). Grave goods were few, and absent as in the case of disarticulated burial, where the body was put into a ditch with other bodies.


Pergamon
Anatolia
Priene
Miletos
Termessos
Thera
nossos
Azoria
Gournia
Palaikastro
nias
ssara
istos
ANCIENT GREECE

(Drawn by author.)

The only sense we have of elaborate funeral behaviour is in the "funerary complex." In these cases we have found examples of the collection of bodies and of body modification such as in the case of the archaeological record from Prodromos in the Early Neolithic (Chourmouziadis 1971, 1973). Here we have evidence of secondary burial, with eleven skulls and some thigh and rib bones deposited carefully in three levels beneath a

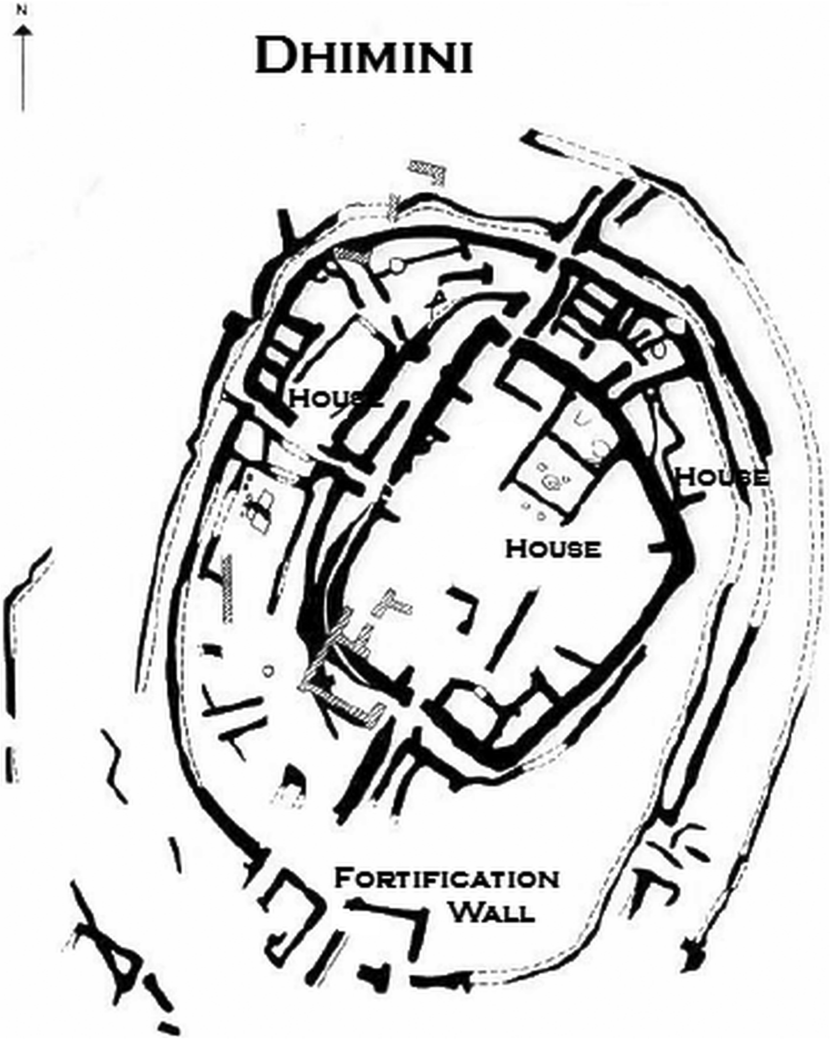

N
DHIMINI
HOUSE
HOUSE
HOUSE
FORTIFICATION WALL

Figure 3.3 Plan of Neolithic Dhimini. (Redrawn from Souvatki 2008: figure 5.31.)

house floor. While we do not fully understand the reasons for this secondary burial, it does represent some sort of ritualized attempt to remember parts of the past.

We lack strong evidence for religious ritual existing outside the household. Neither Sesklo nor Dhimini contained an independent building

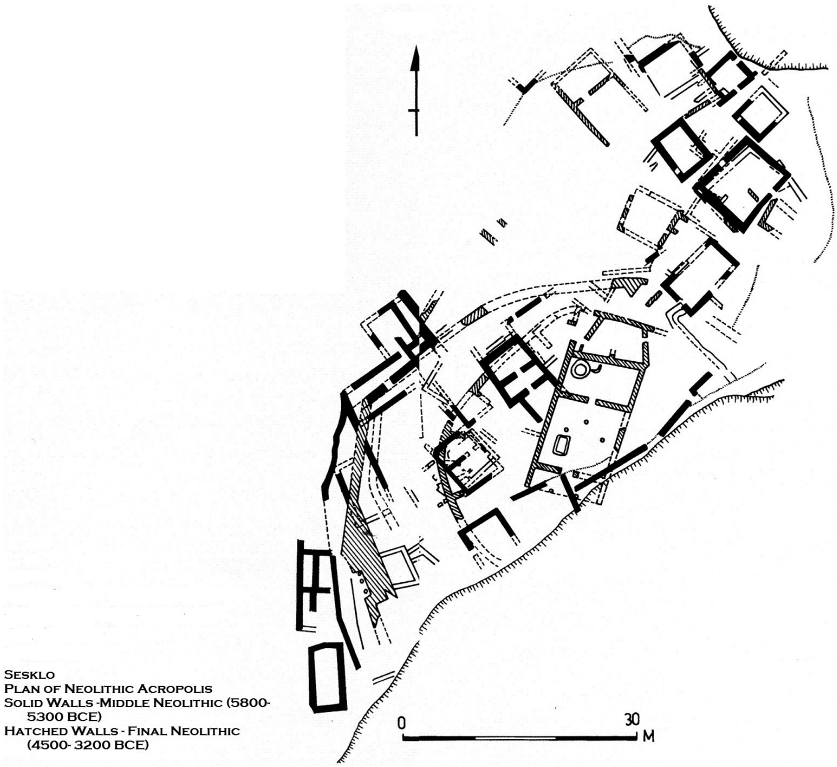

Sesklo
Plan of Neolithic Acropolis
Solid Walls -Middle Neolithic (5800-5300 BCE)
Hatched Walls - Final Neolithic (4500-3200 BCE)
0
30
M

Figure 3.4 Plan of Neolithic Sesklo. (Redrawn from www.arxeion-politismou.gr/2017/06/Sesklo.html.)

which was unambiguously religious, representing an ideological institution not attached to a household, and I remain unconvinced by attempts to identify such a building at Neo Nikomedeia because the argument is based on very slim evidence (Marangou 2001). We are left to conclude that what religious practice there might have been in the Neolithic was embedded in domestic life.

Just what the ideology of these domestic religious rituals was is only incompletely understood. Bucrania, or plastered over bulls' skulls, have been found in some Greek Neolithic domestic contexts. This shows that the ideological attention paid to the bull in later Greek history has a deep local history, as well as connections to similar Neolithic art in well-excavated sites such as Çatal Hüyük in Turkey. There was a flourishing use of figurines, animal and human, with the female figurine predominant. But here we are not much closer to any concept of Neolithic ideology, since the female figurines have been identified as goddesses, ancestors, fertility symbols, and even toys. Considerations of archaeological association may in the future help to a limited extent. For example, figurines that have been found associated with food storage areas might allow us to at least suggest that one of their roles was to protect the fecundity of the food supply (Preziosi and Hitchcock 1999). Talalay (2004) has also noted that several figurines are headless, which might allow us to suggest that they may well have had a function similar to that of head veneration in Neolithic communities further to the east, such as Çatal Hüyük in Turkey.

There is good evidence that some of these institutions, e.g. those embedded in trade and craft production, were associated with intercommunity networking. Both Dhimini and Sesklo, as well as several other sites, supply us with evidence of obsidian sourced from the Aegean island of Melos, which points to some sort of intersite commerce, perhaps even the presence of itinerant stone tool makers. Spondylus shells have been found in abundance in several Neolithic houses, a noteworthy example being the more than 5000 pieces recovered from Dhimini. Workshops, located within households and shared by more than one household, were making spondylus beads and bracelets which were traded between various settlements throughout Greece. Talalay (1987) has argued that split figurines found at some Neolithic sites were products of formal agreements between families in different communities – a point to which I will return shortly. Numerous ethnographic studies of communities with similar social structure indicate that the contexts for this type of association were feasting ceremonies within which there was an exchange of intercommunity goods, by either redistribution or formal exchange.

A similar situation of household production and exchange can be seen outside Sesklo and Dhimini, and indications of intercommunity networking can be seen at other sites in the later Neolithic. There is a change from ceramics of rather plain design to those of more elaborate forms and decoration, which indicates that pottery manufacture would have tied into larger exchange networks. A salient example is Urfinis ware (Jacobsen 1984). More prevalent in communities of the southern mainland, this ceramic type was extremely uniform in style from settlement to settlement, which indicates it was the product of distinct types of social bonding, represented by the use of similarly styled vessels in feasting, or, at the least, shared concepts between potters of different communities. A ceramics trade network at least 70 km in length was operating in Neolithic Knossos (Tomkins 2004). Given our overview of agricultural risk in Greece, pots like these may well represent participation in feasting activities, used as contexts for the creation of bonds of connection and possible assistance, to be tapped in times of subsistence shortfall (Halstead 2004).

While we have been talking about positive aspects of connection and cooperation between settlements, there is another, somewhat more sinister form of connection, raiding, which probably played an important role. Settlements such as Sesklo and Dhimini had defensive features such as stone walls with baffle gates, and ditches with V-shaped slopes. There is additional good evidence for a concentration on defense in settlement distribution in Thessaly which goes back to the early years of the Neolithic (Runnels et al. 2009). Here survey indicates that there were no man's lands in between the settlements. In respect to stealing animals and food, raiding could easily have met the need to avoid subsistence shortfall. Again, these raids must have been organized and carried out within the households themselves, either alone or in conjunction with other households.

Were Communities Hierarchical?

We have seen that the institutions of Neolithic communities were embedded in the household. But was there an asymmetrical relationship between households in communities like Nea Nikomedeia, Dhimini, and Sesklo? Were there institutions between different households where one could negotiate asymmetrical differences in relationships between the households? These questions have been central to much thinking about Neolithic society in Greece. Earlier analyses by archaeologists such as Halstead (1984, 1993, 1995, 1999) concluded that there was significant inequality between households in settlements like Dhimini. The argument ran that the difference in sizes between houses and concentrations of prestige goods such as spondylus arm bands by possible elite pot latching behavior (House 23 at Dhimini) represented the first phases of the trajectory of elites, termed "megaron elites," who were to appear in the Bronze Age (Halstead 1984, 1995, 1999). Halstead (1995) also notes that in the early and middle periods of the Neolithic the location of many cooking facilities was in open spaces between houses in communities. These spaces would have represented major feasting areas, which would have tied together different families within the community, producing social ties and obligations between them. In the late Neolithic, however, he sees a shift to cooking facilities being controlled by single families. This would mean that individual families were becoming competitive within their own communities, rather than cooperative. Rather than sharing food and the ideology of feasting, they were probably hoarding their supplies instead. As Halstead sees it, this may well have been the beginning of the rise of powerful families who were to surface in the later Bronze Ages (3rd to 2nd millennium BCE), and whose social power was vested in the control and redistribution of materials.

While Halstead has focused on aspects of feasting and house size, subsequent sensitive analysis (Souvatzi 2007, 2008, 2013) has demonstrated that size differences between households is a function not of hierarchy but of differences in household activities, which were not linked to asymmetrical relationships between households. That is, different households were engaged in different types of production specializations which affected their size. Furthermore, Greek Neolithic communities demonstrate a rather homogeneous distribution of various classes of artifacts (figurines, pottery, lithic tools, imported obsidian, etc.) and subsistence evidence from household to household with some clustering of specific artifacts tied to production specializations, either within one household or, as seen in area S8 at Dhimini, tied to shared functions between households. But the central problem with these analyses is that they center only on the material from the acropoleis (that is, the actual tell areas) and not the totality of the entire town. Any conclusions therefore would apply only to a minor percentage of the entire population of these communities.

What existed on this large, whole community scale? If we cannot directly outline a hierarchy between households because of a lack of large-scale data, is there any method which might allow us to understand the relationships between different households indirectly? There might be one. Bintliff (2012: 54–59)[3] argues that the size of the settlements indicates that there was some sort of supra household institution or institutions which would have provided mechanisms for such a large community to function. He notes that communities with fewer than 250 people can often be called “face-to-face” societies where all the important decisions pertaining to the community as a whole are worked out in meetings of equals. But this means of cohesion does not extend to larger communities where face-to-face communication could not include the entire community. Therefore there must have been some sort of centralizing, decision-making institution which would function to hold the community together. This could have been the case for large communities in the Greek Neolithic. Dhimini, for example, is estimated to have held up to 5000 people. So its size would require some sort of hierarchical organization. But just what this type of institution might have been remains in the dark, because the lower towns have either not been investigated or, if they have, the results of the research have yet to be published.

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[3] Bintliff is drawing on some early and important work by Johnson (1982), who looked at the issue of scalar stress in effective communication in small communities. The issue of community fissioning is not particular to Greece; see Bandy’s (2004) excellent work with community fissioning in South America.

While we cannot identify a hierarchical relationship between households at settlements like Dhimini, there is one view of the community as a whole which suggests some sort of disparity between different areas in the settlement, based not on any notion of wealth inequity but on the subtle differences which might exist between older, more established neighborhoods of a community and newer ones. As mentioned, Sesklo and Dhimini were often associated with lower towns, which made them the high grounds or acropoleis of their larger communities. The architecture of these tells differs from that of the lower towns, in that houses in the lower towns appear to have been less permanent, with growth over time witnessing abandonment and the construction of new houses. The tells were different in that the construction of their successive houses remained in place. This rigidity of successive house construction might have produced a sense of ancestral authority for those occupying the tells, a sense which was probably missing in the lower settlements. This might well have produced a strong sense of inequality between occupants of both the acropoleis and the lower towns.

Measures of Social Complexity

Neolithic communities, especially the tell sites, have enough archaeological evidence to allow us to say something about their social structure and hence their complexity. As noted, the hallmark of these communities was the observation that the household was the basic social unit. And the household incorporated important social institutions, such as those of religion, craft production, burial, trade, and even raiding. The full articulation of these institutions into independent social entities was not to occur for some time to come. Although embedded in the households, it was likely that it was these social institutions which helped to hold the communities together, but the glue must have been weak. Our knowledge of extra-household institutions is slight, and there is little to indicate that there was a pronounced hierarchy among the households themselves. Tradition might have signaled that the households of the acropoleis were in some respect seen as more privileged, but we cannot speak beyond that.

Readings

An expansive overview of the Neolithic can be found in Perlès (2001). Various important sites have also been published. For Knossos, see

Evans (1964, 1971), Efstratiou et al. (2004), and chapters in Efstratiou et al. (2013). Important sites, such as Sesklo and Dhimini in Thessaly, were excavated around the turn of the last century. Further studies have been limited, but see Adrimi-Sismani (2008), Chourmouziadis (1993) (mentioned above, in Greek) for Dhimini, and Wijnen (1981) for more recent overviews.