

OnliNEOLITHIC: Lectures on the Neolithic in the New Abnormal

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In January 2020, the COVID 19 pandemic ushered in a new era unlike any we have experienced in our lifetimes. Within this new normal or even better, this new abnormal, our daily lives in our isolated homes shifted to on-line platforms. Gatherings, meetings, conferences and face to face courses were replaced by communication through smart devices and cameras. These circumstances, although difficult, also provided a unique opportunity to bring together the many members of our farflung community to discuss the Neolithic of southwest Asia. In particular the differences and diversity within our current data. By combining the words online and Neolithic, we titled the new series, OnliNEOLITHIC.

A primary motivation behind this series was to convene both Southwest Asian Neolithic experts and young researchers from around the globe, who found it difficult to attend meetings due to the expense of travel, accommodation, and registration fees before COVID. By allowing young people to attend from home, they had the rare opportunity to “meet” and ask questions of the researchers who produced the publications they read in their courses or cited in their theses. Thus, we

were keen to use a medium of communication that is academic and more friendly and open than the less interactive webinar seminars.

We also chose to upload each lecture to Youtube the week it was given (https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=onlineolithic+series), so that an even larger audience could engage with the series. We selected a video source that is available to anybody who wishes to learn about the transition from a hunter-gatherer way of living to a sedentary life, the motivation behind the sustenance of this new lifeways in different regions, and how it differed on regional and local scales.

We were also inspired to dedicate this series to Trevor Watkins who made eminent contributions to our knowledge and understanding of the Neolithic period.

In the fall of 2016, Trevor Watkins invited us to a two-day meeting in Berlin, titled “The Long Revolution: Becoming Neolithic in Southwest Asia” (Fig. 1), which convened esteemed scholars on the Neolithic. By the end of the meeting, we had all promised Trevor to publish a book collection of the papers presented at the conference. However, our promise was never



Fig. 1 Berlin 2016, participants of the “The Long Revolution: Becoming Neolithic in Southwest Asia” conference organized by Trevor Watkins. (Photo: Anonymous)

onliNEOLITHIC
TREVOR WATKINS
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**The Neolithic of southwest Asia:
"the fulcrum of the great transformation"**

We need to be sure of the importance of our Neolithic within the long-term story of human history: otherwise, we are in danger of becoming encapsulated within the minutiae of our expanding knowledge, and isolated from the wider world. Here is one way in which our Neolithic story can be shown to work as a critically important episode within the long-term of human history. There are three key features to the story of human across evolution more than two million years:

Gradually accelerating trends in cultural innovation and change, in the expansion of the range of cultural products, skills, and capacities, and in the growth of population density and the scale of human groups. When we focus down into the six millennia of the Epipalaeolithic-Neolithic transformation we can observe those three key features accelerating at an unprecedented rate. Leading evolutionary biologists, anthropologists, Palaeolithic archaeologists and philosophers are now explaining those long-term processes in terms of three cultural evolutionary mechanisms: gene-culture evolution, cultural niche construction, and cumulative culture. I conclude that our Epipalaeolithic-Neolithic transformation is similarly explicable in terms of contemporary cultural evolutionary theory, which enables us to tell the story of the great transformation in terms that are rapidly becoming universal

Fig. 2 Announcement of the first talk of the OnliNEOLITHIC Series by Trevor Watkins. (Design: G. Duru)

fulfilled. Along with contributing important research on sites such as Qermez Dere and Pınarbaşı (Watkins 1990, 1996), Trevor Watkins inspired and impacted the careers of the scholars involved in these projects. One of his most valuable contributions is his translation of Jacques Cauvin's (Cauvin 2000) seminal book *"The Birth of the Gods and the Origins of Agriculture"* which because it was written in French, was not widely accessible to the English-speaking world. This work has been critical in shaping current understanding of the Neolithic period. Trevor has also produced numerous articles on cognitive and evolutionary psychology of the human mind and culture and the emergence of the "modern" human mind and cultural systems of symbolic representations. These papers brought important new perspectives to Neolithic research over the last twenty-five years. We are grateful for his contributions and for his embracing, constructive and supportive attitude. For these reasons we chose to dedicate the first onliNEOLITHIC series in his honour.

Reading the Southwest Asian Neolithic Through Differences

The main purpose of the first onliNEOLITHIC series was to consider the range of variability in Neolithic societies, by emphasizing differences rather than similarities.

The continual accumulation of archaeological knowledge since the early 1900s has provided a clear picture of the Neolithic way of life, yet in recent years our definitions and interpretations have frequently shifted with the advancement of new research programs and the collection of new data. We have discussed the Neolithic and continue to do so within a variety of theoretical frameworks and approaches (e.g. "the agricultural revolution", core-periphery relations and homogenous

cultural regions, cultural definitions based on chipped stone technologies, the "Neolithic package" and its expansion, "the golden triangle", "the birth of the gods", and others). Each approach offered invaluable insights into a period, region or topic, but at the same time made it even more difficult to understand the Neolithic in its entirety and defining the different mindsets and lifestyles during this period of profound change.

Nowadays, archaeologists often revisit previous approaches or re-evaluate sites excavated during the '60s and '70s with modern "tools" provided by the archaeological science. The stratigraphy, chronology, and terminology of Neolithic research, in a sense, has become a mound of data waiting to be excavated and analyzed with new methods. Recent research on the Neolithic aptly documents the independent formation of these new ways of life in different regions of Southwest Asia. The presence of distinct communities sharing the same landscape and circumstances highlights the importance of understanding the diverse nature of the Neolithic.

The keynote lecture of the OnliNEOLITHIC Series was presented by Trevor Watkins (Fig. 2). His talk titled "The fulcrum of the great transformation" highlighted the theoretical background and the critical importance of the Neolithic period within the long story of human history. The presentation was followed by a very lively discussion, as was the case also for the subsequent talks. The second speaker, Juan José Ibáñez, reported new data from his excavations at two spectacular sites, Tell Qarassa (Syria) and Kharaysin (Jordan). His comprehensive lecture was titled "From hunter-gatherer to farming societies – perspectives from the north of southern Levant (Qarassa and Kharaysin)". Marion Benz, Hans Georg K. Gebel and Christoph Purschwitz presented a variety of data types to highlight social differentiation during the LPPNB from Ba`ja in the Petra Area of Jordan. They detailed the close relationships between the living and the dead which created strong but

demanding collective memories. Cheryl Makarewicz and Bill Finlayson discussed how mortuary practices constructed communities and social networks in the Neolithic of southern Jordan. The talk was as appealing as the title of the presentation, “Bring us your dead”. “Then and now, 70 years of Neolithic studies in the Near East” was presented by distinguished scholars, Anna Belfer-Cohen and Nigel Goring-Morris. Their lecture detailed long-term cultural change especially in human burial practices across the long chronology of the Epipaleolithic and early Neolithic in the Levant and other regions of Western Asia. Ian Hodder presented a new perspective on Neolithic social organization in Southwest Asia based on recent data from Çatalhöyük. He introduced the terms “molar” and the “molecular” to describe shifting forms of egalitarianism across the occupation of the site. Jean-Denis Vigne and François Briois presented the recent results of the archaeological field work carried out in early Neolithic Cyprus from villages with pre-domestic cultivators, followed by developments in agriculture and stockbreeding. Douglas Baird summarized 20 years of excavation at the sites of Pınarbaşı and Boncuklu on the Konya Plain in central Anatolia. He interwove community identities, individual histories, and ritual and ancestral practices with the results of a variety of bioarchaeological, isotope and aDNA analysis. Ian Kuijt, the ninth speaker, focused on food shortage, risk and famine in the Neolithic. He drew attention to the insecurity, planning, and materiality of food storage and networks of food sharing during the emergence of early agricultural villages. Leore Grosman and Natalie Munro discussed the continuity of cultural traditions across the Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic boundary, beginning with their work at the Late Natufian site of Nahal Ein Gev II and expanding out to other Natufian and early Neolithic sites in the southern Levant. After a long break from his excavations at the Kömürcü-Kaletepe obsidian workshop in Cappadocia, Didier Binder presented data and recent interpretations on early PPNB obsidian networks and the transition to Neolithic in central Anatolia. In the final talk of the series, Mihriban Özbaşaran discussed Aşıklı, an early sedentary community in east Central Anatolia, and Güneş Duru presented Balıklı, a neighbouring community contemporaneous with Aşıklı. The presentation underscored the differences in material culture and lifestyles between the two neighbouring sites despite their co-existence in the same environment.

Over the course of 12 lectures, 19 researchers met with 600 different participants from numerous time zones in 20 countries including Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, China, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Iran, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

We felt that it was important that the language and visual design used to communicate the series reflect the digital flavor of the world we live in. The poster and videos were designed by Güneş Duru. Sera Yelözer and Melis Uzdurum designed and managed the web site, posted announcements on social media, recorded the lectures, handled the mailings and made sure the Zoom meetings ran smoothly. We are thankful to ex oriente for their social media posts and support, and grateful to all of our colleagues and peers for supporting our series through their attendance and enthusiasm.

Last but not least, we would like to announce the second series, onliNEOLITHIC II, that will be dedicated to the memory of the late Ofer Bar-Yosef, whose voluminous research program provided significant momentum for research on the Neolithic period in Southwest Asia and beyond. For details and program, please see www.onlineolithic.com.

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