

Revisiting the Hilly Flanks: The Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic Periods in the Eastern Fertile Crescent

Tobias Richter and Hojjat Darabi

In the past two decades research into the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture has intensified in the Eastern Fertile Crescent, the region stretching from modern-day southeast Turkey, northwest Iran and northeast Iraq along the Zagros Mountains and its foothills towards southern Iran. To mark the end of the joint Iranian-Danish, six-year research project *Tracking Cultural and Environmental Change: the late Epipalaeolithic and early Neolithic in the Seimarréh Valley, central Zagros* we organized a five-day conference bringing together scholars working on the Epipalaeolithic-Neolithic transition in the Eastern Fertile Crescent. Due to ongoing travel restrictions imposed because of the COVID-19 pandemic the conference was held online, which enabled the participation of scholars from Iran, Turkey, Germany, Denmark, the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and Japan, among others. Over the course of five days from 21st-25th June 2021, sixty-two papers were presented, including presentations on recent excavations and surveys, synthetic overviews, and specialist studies of botanical remains, faunal assemblages, human remains, geoarchaeology, paleoenvironment and material culture.

Presentations on the first day focused mostly on overviews and key debates within Neolithic research in western Asia. Barbara Helwing reviewed how past and recent research in the EFC had been shaped by and simultaneously shaped agendas in Neolithization research. Dorian Fuller discussed the varied range of plants that came under cultivation in various parts of the Fertile Crescent and the processes underlying their domestication and highlighted the diversity of crop packages in each sub-region of southwest Asia. Social interaction and the relationship of late Epipalaeolithic and early Neolithic communities throughout the Fertile Crescent, and the fundamentality of these relations for the Neolithization process, was the focus of Trevor Watkins' talk during the morning session. Subsequent presentations by Hojjat Darabi *et al.*, Douglas Baird, Nicolas Conard *et al.* and Roger Matthews and Hassan Fazeli Nashli all summarized the overall results of major ongoing fieldwork projects. Mehmet Özdoğan's talk focused on the dispersal of the Neolithic economy and way of life out of the Fertile Crescent to the west, while Frank Hole reflected on the work of Robert Braidwood and colleagues and its lasting influence on research agendas to this day. The keynote talk at the end of the first day was given by Melinda Zeder who provided a thorough overview and deeply engaging discussion of the history of research into the transition to agriculture, current research, and its relationship to broader debates in discussions of cultural evolution and domestication.

Day two of the conference was dominated by presentations reporting results of new fieldwork, such as Lee Clare and Moritz Kinzel's talk on Early Neolithic Göbekli Tepe, Abu Bakar Siddiq and Vecihi Özkaya's presentation about Körtik Tepe, and Marjan Mashkour *et al.*'s talk about the first excavations at Tapeh Qazānchi. In addition, Wendy Matthews spoke about issues surrounding sustainable land use and lifeways among early Neolithic societies in the EFC, while Riel-Salvatore *et al.* presented their work on the legacy collections and archive of Philip Smith's excavations at Ganj Dareh. The first half of the third day was reserved for fieldwork reports focusing on Iran, while the afternoon saw presentations about burial practices and archaeobotanical research, including new analyses of materials from Ganj Dareh and Göbekli Tepe (Fig. 1). A mix of papers ranging from reports about lithic analyses to zooarchaeology and ancient DNA studies, in addition to fieldwork reports, were presented on the fourth day (Fig. 2). These included papers on archaeobotany and zooarchaeology by Bendrey, Bangsgaard and Yeomans, Dal, de Groene and Asouti *et al.*, as well as several papers focusing on lithic analysis by Pichon, Zeidi and Conard, Shakuie *et al.*, Nishiaki, and Jayez.

The fifth and final day of the conference, although overall shorter, contained a number of interesting papers on ceramic technology by Petrova *et al.* and Bahrabani, radiocarbon chronology and modelling by Roe, as well as a series of papers about paleoenvironmental studies by Rabbani, Rostami *et al.* and Fleitmann *et al.* A final discussion took place during the afternoon of the last day.

Overall, the Revisiting the Hilly Flanks: The Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic periods in the Eastern Fertile Crescent allowed archaeologists and colleagues from related fields working along the eastern Taurus-Zagros



Fig. 1 Early Neolithic wall installation of wild sheep horn cores, Ganj Dareh excavations 2017. (Photo: Tracking Cultural and Environmental Change Project)



Fig. 2 An aerial view of the Epipalaeolithic rockshelter of Mar Gurgalan, Huleilan Valley, western Iran. (Photo: Reza Azizi)

arc to connect and exchange ideas and views with each other. Although the conference had to be held entirely online, this format enabled the participation of many colleagues from Iran and other countries in the region, as well as North America and Japan who might otherwise had not been able to take part. Special thanks should be given to the colleagues based in very different time zones who got in the very early morning or stayed online until late into the night to take part. In the final discussion participants highlighted that past and more recent research in the Eastern Fertile Crescent has marked this region out as a key area to understand the complementary and mosaic-like processes that underlay the gradual emergence and adoption of plant and animal domestication, sedentary and nomadic pastoralist lifestyles, as well as changes in social and ritual organization. While the participants also highlighted many gaps and issues that need to be overcome, this conference has made further vital step towards sharing the results of the research in the Neolithization of the Eastern Fertile Crescent with a wider audience. To this end, a volume of conference proceedings will be put together in the coming months. The presentations from the conference remain available on the conference

YouTube channel, which can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCx1o_UIBTqHRFmu-vMooBELw.

Acknowledgements: The organizing committee would like to thank all the conference participants for their contributions, as well as Dr. Camilla Mazzucatto, Asta Salicath Halvorsen and Martin Løvgren Brøcker for administrative and technical help and support. The conference was made possible thanks to generous funding from the Christian Ludvid David Foundation, and was supported by the University of Copenhagen, Razi University and the Research Institute for Cultural Heritage and Tourism of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Tobias Richter

Centre for the Study of Early Agricultural Societies,
University of Copenhagen
richter@hum.ku.dk

Hojjat Darabi

Department of Archaeology,
Razi University, Kermanshah
hojjatdarabi@gmail.com