

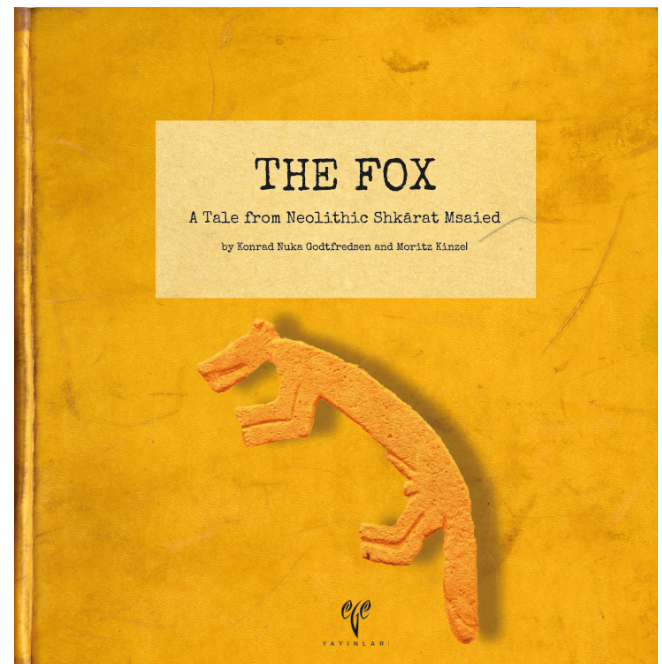
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Review of Konrad N. Godtfredsen and Moritz Kinzel, 2020. *The fox: a tale from Neolithic Shkārat Msaied*. Istanbul: Ege Yayınları. ISBN 978-605-7673-50-3. € 15.

In order to bring archaeological knowledge closer to a broad public, for example in exhibitions, non-fiction books or historical novels, narrative structures are usually used. This always bears the risk that fictional elements have to be incorporated to create coherent and thus comprehensible narrative strands. The inclusion of fictional or non-researched features increases significantly in illustrations, regardless of whether a narrative is being told or whether it is a pure reconstruction. Nevertheless, illustrations depicting the everyday life of excavations or reconstructions of monuments go back as far as archaeological excavations themselves (Hageneuer 2016:359). Well known and impressive are e.g. the reconstructions of Assur by Walter Andrae (Andrae 1909) or of Babylon by Robert Koldewey (Koldewey 1913) even if they were created with some guesswork. However, illustrations tend to play a subordinate role in archaeological science communication. On the one hand, this is certainly due to the fact that science communication addressing a non-scientific audience is rarely appreciated by the academic community. On the other hand, it is also due to the difficulty that an illustration does not allow for either-or issues. Thus, with few exceptions (e.g., Swogger 2015:16; Rajic and Horwarth 2021), illustrated archaeological narratives remain limited to children's books. It is therefore all the more gratifying that the graphic novel *The Fox* not only dares to take the step of telling an illustrated narrative that is also addressed to an adult audience, but that it also reflects on the difficulties of such a publication, the process of creation and the decisions regarding the reconstructions that were made.

The Fox tells a story from the Neolithic site Shkārat Msaied (8340-7960 cal BCE, MPPNB), located in present-day Jordan and currently being excavated by a Danish research team. To venture the experiment of presenting excavation results in a graphically illustrated narrative, illustrator Konrad Nuka Godtfredsen and archaeologist Moritz Kinzel, as well as other excavation team members, worked closely together. That the book wholeheartedly dares to break science out of its ivory tower to reach a broad audience is not only evident in its design, but also in its additional open-access online publication (<https://sites.google.com/view/the-fox-neolithic-graphicnovel/home>), as well as in the multilingualism of the book, which is published in four languages (English, Danish, German, and Turkish). A translation into the national language of the excavation site (Arabic), which would be most desirable, is not yet available, but is in planning (personal communication, M. Kinzel; August 15, 2021).

The claim of the book is not to tell an adventure story or a tale on the basis of archaeological remains,



but to look behind the scenes of building a narrative in archaeology, in other words, to shed light on interpretation (1). This approach is also reflected in the three-part structure of the book: The first part (introduction) contains a short explanation of the objectives, the introduction of the research team and gives background information on the Neolithic society of Shkārat Msaied. The second part (graphic novel) that follows is again divided into three parts: 1. a prologue that refers to the excavation history; 2. a main part (called *The Fox*) in which the story of a Neolithic woman from Shkārat Msaied is told – embedded in various cycles of, for example, the seasons, iterative rituals or house renewal processes; and 3. an epilogue, in which one possible alternative way of creating the graphic novel is shown. In the following third part (concluding remarks) the process of storytelling as well as the topics addressed in the graphic novel are reflected against the background of the archaeological data.

The two different narrative strands (6-49 and 52-57), as well as the discussion in the epilogue, demonstrate in a way that is comprehensible to an audience not familiar with archaeology or with scientific practices that each interpretation is only one perspective or construction (namely our modern one) on a time period or an archaeological site (cf. 62). That excavation results often raise more questions than they answer is shown particularly subtly within the main section (*The Fox*), where discussions between excavation staff repeatedly interrupt and guide the main narrative (Fig. 1). Furthermore, these comments already indicate whether the images or reconstructions are based on archaeological data or not. In some cases, even references to further literature are given in the illustrations, as for example in the case of a depicted *chaîne opératoire* for flint knapping (22) or for the production of “greenstone” beads (23).

The archaeological data on which the illustrations are based are described in detail in the epilogue.

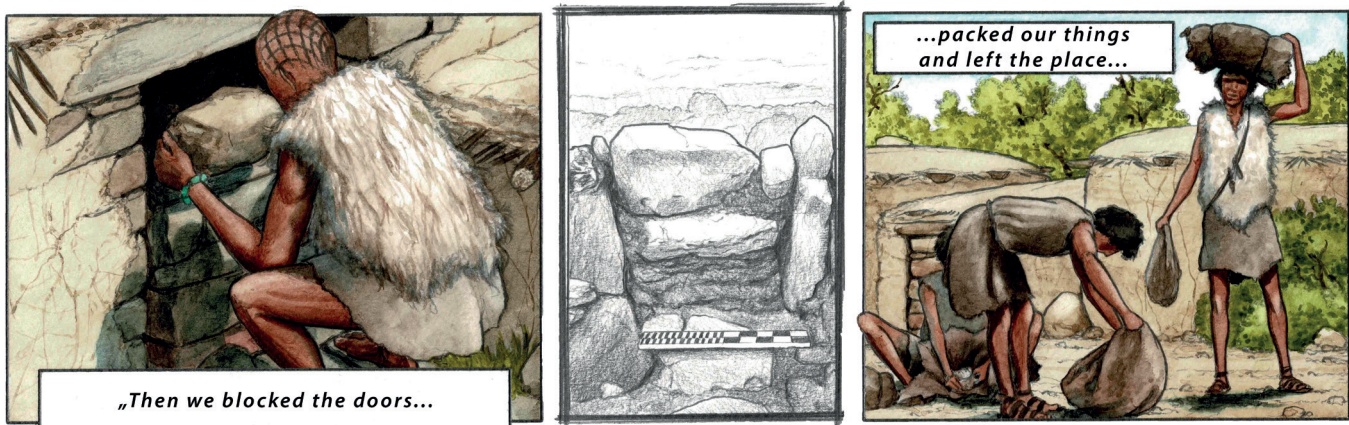


Fig. 1 The state in which archaeologists uncover a site corresponds to that in which it was abandoned. Here, the illustrations vividly interweave the archaeological findings (blocked entrance) with abandonment practices (people preparing to leave) and detachment from place (the community and their animals on the move). (48 in *The Fox*, drawing: K.N. Godtfredsen/ M.Kinzel)

Particular attention is paid to the research history of the excavation, the Neolithic architecture, the paleoenvironment or rather food production, the production of tools and beads (authored by Moritz Kinzel, Bo Dahl Hermansen, and Mette Bangsbord Thuesen; 60-71) as well as the handling of the dead, death rituals and shamanism (authored by Bo Dahl Hermansen; 72-78). Unfortunately, the epilogue neither explains nor discusses the presumed semi-nomadic lifestyle of the Neolithic community and the related abandonment processes of the houses or the settlement, although this issue plays a major role in the narrative. However, the omission of information is reasonable, since the book is not designed as a comprehensive overall presentation. A compromise was also chosen with regard to references, so that important, but not all, statements are proven by sources. Even if this approach does not correspond to scientific standards, it is quite adequate for a popular scientific publication and offers a suitable introduction that is not overwhelming for the non-specialist audience. In addition, the thematically sorted references in the appendix (82-84) are particularly helpful.

How a coherent narrative was developed in spite of the incomplete data is explained in detail: If there was not enough information available from Shkārāt Msaied, material from surrounding sites was first used for reconstructions, and finally information from the wider region or even occasionally from regions outside Southwest Asia (60-61). The fact that this approach is unusual for the scientists and led to painful decisions is clearly emphasized (60). Nevertheless, the discussion of the topic vividly shows to the reader the difficulties associated with narratives and already subliminally points to the necessary process of analogy-building in archaeology. In addition, the audience is introduced to topics that go beyond the excavations in Shkārāt Msaied. For example, reference is made to the Nevalı Çori-“totem pole”, the Nahal Hemar skull and to the plastered skulls from Jericho and ‘Ain Ghazal for the reconstruction of haircuts (66).

Analogy-building in archaeology is explained in particular detail in the context of death rituals (B.D. Hermansen; 70-79). Based on the description of the

findings in Shkārāt Msaied, the frequently used concept on *rites-de-passage* by van Gennep (1909) is used as a basis for interpretation. The separation of corpse parts and presumably cyclical redepositions traced in Shkārāt Msaied are considered in the broader context of archaeological finds of the region and their interpretations. Lastly, a possible special role of the woman is discussed, since her body was buried separately from the skull and mandible. In this context, ethnographic analogies are drawn to shamanistic practices. The methods of archaeological interpretation and storytelling are illustrated to the readers in an impressive way. Even if the conclusions are in part highly speculative, they are nevertheless easily comprehensible. For a few exceptions, however, one would have wished for more explanations. For example, it remains unclear why a vertical shamanism is assumed for Shkārāt Msaied, although the archaeological findings seem to speak for a rather egalitarian society.

Thus, while for most of the topics the background of the reconstructions and the assumptions are explained in great detail, the eponymous fox surprisingly is hardly discussed (62). Due to the find situation in House F, where both fox bones and the remains of a woman were found, a spiritual connection between the fox and the protagonist is assumed in the graphic novel. This assumption is mainly attributed to a daring and quite questionable interpretation of fox representations at Göbekli Tepe by J. Peters and K. Schmidt (2004). Whereby it is worth mentioning that also the fox on the cover of the book represents the “Göbekli Tepe fox”, which remains unmentioned in the book. Besides the depictions in Göbekli Tepe, foxes are almost absent in the Neolithic iconography (but see grooved stones from Jerf el Ahmar, Stordeur 2000). Although fox bones are quite frequent in Neolithic faunal assemblages, and even a human-fox burial is known (Maher *et al.* 2011), it cannot be concluded from these few findings that the fox was given a prominent symbolic role within Neolithic society. The interpretation of the fox as a mediator between the underworld and the world of the living is not only a very modern view but is also

strongly connected with its interpretation at Göbekli Tepe. If the depiction, or rather the interpretation, of foxes between female breasts from the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük had been taken as a reference, the story might have revolved around topics of gender, power, or fleshly transformation (cf. Hodder 1987, 1990, 1999; Gifford-Gonzalez 2007).

Aside from the validity of the fox story, aspects whose reconstruction is not possible or only possible to a limited extent due to the data situation are dealt with very sensitively, not only in the discussion, but also in the illustrations. For example, the naming of persons was avoided as no information about language in the Neolithic is known today (62). Instead of using striking images or the typical narratives of popular science, these are deliberately addressed; for example, within the

alternative graphic story, in which the usual but outdated approach of depicting hunter-gatherers is described: “[...] the protagonists are primitive, wild and naked savages with bad health, hunger bellies, and behaviours that fulfill all gender clichés [...]”.

The Fox pursues highly ambitious and demanding goals, which, however, are inherently becoming a stumbling block themselves. What is appealing, but at the same time problematic, about the graphic novel format is the ability to bridge between fact and fiction. Such stories aim to arouse the reader’s interest in a topic. At the same time, they have to meet the demands of science to adequately convey results on the one hand, and on the other hand, they have to take into account the artistic freedom of the illustrator. This issue becomes visible, for example, in the discussion (64)



Fig. 2 Two children from Shkārat Msaied consider alternatives to circular building construction while looking into the future at the late PPNB settlement Ba’ja. As a gimmick, the children’s drawings refer to later appearing rectangular architecture, namely the Minoan labyrinth, the Palladian Villa Rotonda, and the Barcelona Pavillon of Mies van der Rohe. (40 in *The Fox*, drawing: K.N. Godtfredsen/ M.Kinzel)

about how to depict the research history (by the way the only “narrative” that is already existing or rather is documented). The illustrator decided to depict it in a somewhat counterintuitive way inspired by Indiana Jones (7). These changes do not violate any norm, nor do they serve common clichés. This, in turn, appears to be different when it comes to the representation of gender. Although the claim of the scientists was a representation that is as gender-neutral as possible (64-65), artistic freedom prevailed in some aspects. For example, the depiction of the female breast is overly idealized and strongly reminiscent of Godtfredsen’s typically erotically charged drawings.

In summary, *The Fox* introduces its readers comprehensively and thoroughly to important topics discussed in Neolithic research, such as the transition from round to rectangular architecture (Fig. 2), resource procurement and trade, or mortuary practices. The formation of narratives in archaeology certainly has its difficulties (cf. Pluciennik 2010; van Dyke and Bernbeck 2015 among others), and in some details, the claims of *The Fox* can be directed against the book project itself. For the same reason it is encouraging that Kinzel and Godtfredsen have embarked on this endeavor in a truly unconventional and profound way that enables the non-scientific public to participate in the scientific discussion. It would be highly desirable for archaeological projects not only to incorporate science communication more often in the future but also to accept it as a scientific responsibility to the public. Experimenting with different formats is very promising since archaeology is an attractive field for a broad audience, as is shown by the omnipresence of archaeological topics in the media (Notroff and Dietrich 2019). *The Fox* shows that it is possible to responsibly demonstrate the background and difficulties of archaeological narratives and still convey archaeological knowledge in an extremely attractive way. The result is a book that is a pleasure to read, look at, and think about, whether one is a layperson or a scientist with a background in the field.

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