

Editorial on the Current Threats to Neolithic Research

While we were writing this editorial, darkness and agony have fallen over Europe, accompanied by tremendous solidarity and awakening humanity. Universal human values and rights are daily violated and suspended. Our thoughts and sorrow are with the people of Ukraine.

Hardly recovered from the Corona Crises, the Ukrainian tragedy again plainly raises the focus of what matters in our lives? It intensifies once again the earlier question – which had already recently strengthened – of how to answer students and young colleagues why they should stay in Neolithic research? What good and honest arguments do we have that are not supported solely by our desire for a new research generation and assistance in our research? Is our devotion to Neolithic subjects a sufficient and responsible reason to lure students or young colleagues onto uncertain professional paths? Are our investigations into the Neolithic more than just a passion? We are convinced that understanding long-term developments, many of which started with sedentary life and led to fundamentally new concepts of living together, may help us in better understanding even the most recent developments and perhaps help us to conceive a better future.

This editorial is not about pessimism. Although we are not able to present suggestions to solve the problems, we will try to responsibly identify these problems and their structural constraints. This may help to a better and more alerted handling of the powerful and troubling developments in research or, at least, to mitigate them.

In recent years we have seen an unprecedented intensification and acceleration in existing and emerging problem areas of our research that, taken together, may become existentially threatening to Neolithic research in southwest Asia, or that had already become destructive in some national academic contexts.

In our view, the currently intensifying structural (1.1-5), divisive (2.1-3) and political (3.1) problem areas in Near Eastern Neolithic research are:

1.1 Few internationally active commercial publishing houses influence and set research standards and agendas by their market power. They are able to create and maintain mainstream research markets by controlled review regimes, organized topic volumes or article acquisition. Submitted contributions are often confronted with non-transparent and selective preferences. Publishers determine technical hurdles/ filters in pre-publication procedures, and they frequently sell our very own research to fellow researchers at high costs, or to make matters worse, they demand high sums for open access options. They have established their influence in deciding academic futures and success – and young colleagues are made to believe that they would be successful in their careers only if they served these structures.

1.2 Often, due to economic constraints, academic institutions, including funding institutions, are forced to aim at high profile research with quick and guaran-

teed outputs. They trust or even cooperate with and rely on the market-guided influence of publishing houses and their review regimes and impact point regimes.

1.3 Administrative tasks for ever shorter projects become burdens for scientists. Support of the administrative offices would be fundamentally necessary, but instead administrative attacks on “unprofitable” research areas or on the “small subjects” threaten their existence. In Germany, *e.g.*, we hardly dare to ask how it is possible that administrative staff hold permanent posts, ironically being partly financed by the overhead of funds raised by short-term projects?

1.4 There is a general lack of social and academic security in prehistoric research and of funding in general.

1.5 There are shifting preferences in research that follow *Zeitgeist* issues or subjects on account of basic research as, for example, basic empiric analyses are financed by part-time, temporary contracts, while high-profile genetic research receives comparably high funding. But what if no one provides clearly contextualised samples for the specialists’ studies? Have the mantras of contextual archaeology lost their power? Balanced funding policies and cooperation on a more equitable level would be more promising for integrative approaches.

2.1 The above-mentioned financial and structural constraints and highly competitive milieus often force researchers to care only for their own projects or to focus on highly specialized fields in Neolithic research. There is hardly any time and money for beneficial long-term research attention and transdisciplinary cooperation. This includes also an increasingly observed resignation against downgrading or closing research institutions and the suspension of positions.

2.2 A variety of schismatic impacts include, for example, the continued post-colonial attitudes and structures of foreign archaeological research in Near Eastern countries (the dig-and-run mentalities instead of long-term research strategies); absence or neglect for opportunities to train local students and to cooperate with local colleagues on equal levels; impacts such as from the western “cancel culture” discussions and their stress on research autonomy.

2.3 While the Corona pandemic brought up new paradigms in intensified internationalised exchange (the Zooming facilities and related advantages), much field and lab work became halted and research programs were delayed, not to speak of divisive impacts by hidden mental and social stress for research careers.

3.1 The reduction of our Near Eastern working areas and the consequent failure to introduce the next generation into fieldwork is the result of continuing instability (the Arab Rebellion and related conflicts) in some of the host countries of Neolithic research. In addition, there are the political impacts of interstate conflict situations that can spill over into foreign field research policies by the host countries, and *vice versa*. While the shelves and archives are full of unstudied materials and samples, this situation of reduced working areas has led to a reduction of student numbers, accordingly

followed/ to be followed by reduced funding and institutional support.

What do these issues mean and demand from us? We from *ex oriente* see them as wake-up calls for more and sustained engagement in preserving and protecting Near and Middle East Neolithic research, an engagement that must go beyond our immediate project and institutional interests. The threat to our discipline and its research areas has progressed to the point where a mere opportunistic “carry on” is no longer a responsible behaviour. Parallel to our research, we have to unite in lobbying for our research on all personal, national and international levels, neglecting all dividing sentiments and obstacles. To rescue our disciplines, engagement and a critical positioning against commercial control of research agendas and administrative demands is needed not only by researchers but particularly by established institutions. The enduring value of unstudied collections and materials as well as preserving cultural heritage should be recognized more strongly by funding institutions. Respectful, open-minded collegial cooperation would not only mean synergies on the basic level of logistic and administrative resources, but above all the advancement of methodological and scientific exchange. We all stand on broad shoulders. Nobody has to invent the wheel anew, or follow the popular media’s lead to sell old wine as sensations for profit. Neolithic research will only succeed if acknowledging ideas of others, and sharing knowledge is not hampered because of fears of losing positions but considered as gaining strength as well as autonomy against influential non-archaeological stakeholders.

During the pandemic, wishes to return to real exchange and cooperation intensified enormously. Two Turkish research groups seized the initiative: OnliNeolithic initiated by Mihriban Özbaşaran and Güneş Duru (see their article in this volume) went in its second series in 2021/22 promoting the inspiring multivocality of Neolithic research in Southwest Asia, while the World Neolithic Congress, initiated by Mehmet Özdoğan was announced in Urfa in September 2021 for autumn 2023. It will foster the needed global perspective, and introduces the world-wide scale to unite for Neolithic research. Both events splendidly show how fruitful the exchange of ideas can be and how, by uniting our efforts, we can counteract the threatening developments.

Two fundamental insights may be learned from Neolithic developments. Mitigation is one of our key capacities to aggregate and cooperate in larger communities on a permanent scale. We need to defend these outstanding productive capacities of the Neolithic achievements if we want to live and cooperate in ever larger communities. However, Neolithic people also ran into path-dependencies and severe entanglements with things. If we start to understand these developments, we will be able to stand up for sustainable research solidarity.

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Postscript: Gary Rollefson has improved the language of this editorial, as he did it for many others before. We also thank Gary for his continued support of Neo-Lithics.