

CAMBRIDGE WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY

THE EARLY NEOLITHIC IN GREECE

The first farming communities in
Europe

CATHERINE PERLES

*Institut Universitaire de France
Université Paris X*

Illustrations by

GERARD MONTHEL

*Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
'Préhistoire et Technologie'*



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Trump Medieval 10/13pt *System* QuarkXPress™ [sE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Perlès, Catherine.

The Early Neolithic of Greece: the first farming communities in Europe /
Catherine Perlès, illustrations by Gérard Monthel.

p. cm. – (Cambridge world archaeology)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 80181 8 – ISBN 0 521 00027 0

1. Neolithic period–Greece. 2. Agriculture, Prehistoric–Greece. 3.
Greece–Antiquities. I. Title. II. Series.

GN776.22.G8 P47 2001 338.1'0938–dc21 00–054728

ISBN 0 521 80181 8 hardback

ISBN 0 521 00027 0 paperback

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INTRODUCTION

Why a book on the Early Neolithic of Greece? The simplest answer is that a book on the subject does not exist. Yet, the Early Neolithic of Greece is the oldest in Europe, probably by several centuries. It is also frequently referred to as the source of all further development in Europe, either through the 'maritime route', along the Mediterranean coasts, or through the inland, Danubian route. Such broad statements reveal how poorly the Early Neolithic of Greece (or, for that matter, the Neolithic of Greece in general) is known outside of a small circle of specialists: the relations between the Greek Early Neolithic and that of the Adriatic coast, on the one hand, and of Bulgaria on the other, are in fact very problematic. Similarly, I have found that specialists of the Near Eastern Neolithic are sometimes incredulous when they discover, through lectures, some achievements of Greek Neolithic societies. In both cases the Neolithic in Greece has been superficially and rapidly considered as a distant yet familiar parallel to better known areas, without further investigation. Providing access to currently available data concerning this period and region, showing that the Greek Neolithic possesses its own originality can, by itself, justify this book.

Other motives can be found within the 'small circle of specialists' itself. Major issues such as the origins of the Neolithic in Greece or the existence of a preceramic phase are still vividly, and sometimes violently debated. More often than not the protagonists are unable to present their arguments fully, and the dialogue resembles a '*dialogue de sourds*'. I hope that a more detailed exposition of the problems, even from a one-sided position (I clearly intend to take sides in the debates), will allow a better understanding of their archaeological bases and lead to more fruitful discussions.

However, the main incentive for writing this book lies elsewhere. I am deeply convinced that the fundamental nature of Neolithic societies has escaped us because we have always, perforce, used inappropriate models of interpretation derived from later and structurally different historical contexts. The latter do not and cannot help us to understand societies that were in the unique position of 'inventing' new solutions to the new problems posed by a life based on a new productive economy. These Neolithic societies explored a whole array of different and transitory socioeconomic systems, whose very diversity cannot but be obscured by later historical processes of homogenization. A 'retour aux

sources' is necessary, if we are to avoid following our predecessors in using simplistic models that the most obvious data should have contradicted.¹ Thus, I conceived this book primarily for myself, to try and investigate the problems that puzzled me concerning the nature of the Greek Neolithic. It was undertaken out of frustration, so to speak, after a first synthesis in the limited format of a journal article² had brought to light, more than solved, the many problems raised by the singularity of the Greek Neolithic. This holds true, in particular, for the Early Neolithic: how did early farmers create the bases for a new social organization when they settled in the vast, unexploited inner basins of Greece? What did they retain of their past? How did they organize their mutual relations and their relations to local hunter-gatherers? How did they conceive their position *vis-à-vis* the new 'natural' world they exploited? Clearly, the Early Neolithic by itself presented enough problems and challenges to justify a volume of its own.

This book is indeed deliberately problem-oriented, and to a large extent, polemic in substance if not, I hope, in tone. I make no pretence of exhaustivity, nor even of a balanced treatment of all aspects of the Neolithic society. Neither was this book conceived as a textbook, providing ready access to neatly ordered categories of data. It is conceived as an interplay between problems and data, one question leading to another, one field of inquiry shedding light on another, with the hope of achieving a better understanding of Early Neolithic societies, their way of life, their economic, social and ideological choices.

As with any anthropological study, this book is laden with theory and theories. However, writing a theoretical book, or building a theory of the Greek Neolithic, was not my purpose. Obviously, my very approach to the data and the interpretative stands defended here *are* based on theory, and *have* theoretical implications. They necessarily express personal theoretical positions. But, this is a book intended to be about the Neolithic of Greece, not about myself viewing the Neolithic of Greece. Therefore theoretical discussions will be limited, and the reader will find no statement about my belonging to any of the theoretical 'schools' that are currently fashionable in archaeology. In addition to my French training in technological studies, this is, above all, a deliberate epistemological position: I consider scientific research as a cognitivist process (Giere 1988), which seeks to find, case by case, which amongst the numerous theories available in the literature seems best to fit the data. And I do not believe that, given the complexity of human societies and actions, a single theory can provide answers to all questions.³

¹ The Neolithic flint mines, known since the nineteenth century, constitute a good example. Their presence did not impend the description, for many decades, of Neolithic economy as autarkic and non-specialized. A more current example is provided by the absence of villages or habitations in Western European megalithic areas. After a century of fieldwork, many authors still argue that the megaliths' builders were necessarily sedentary and that their villages will eventually be found. ² Demoule and Perlès 1993.

³ As any manual of sociology will clearly exemplify!

Nevertheless, this very notion of 'complex' societies can be viewed as a theoretical leitmotif that runs through the whole book. Early Neolithic societies cannot be deemed as 'simple' just because they happen to be the first agropastoral societies in a given region, or worse, because they happen to be the most ancient societies studied by specialists of the later phases of Prehistory. There exists an unfortunate tendency to consider anything that is 'first' as necessarily 'simple', and thus to consider Neolithic society, the 'first farmers', as less complex than later Prehistoric societies, that is, as composed of a few, small-scale interacting units. But social evolution does not necessarily develop from the simple to the complex, and the Neolithic of Greece provides good counterexamples of shifts from more complex to more 'simple' levels of organization (Perlès 1992). In addition, one cannot obliterate the long Palaeolithic times, during which complex hunter-gatherer societies have been convincingly brought to light (Price and Brown 1985; Price and Feinman 1995). Nor should we forget, finally, that Neolithic societies in Europe are, one way or the other, the outcome of these unique, profoundly original and necessarily complex societies of the Near Eastern Pre-Pottery Neolithic.

A second theoretical perspective that was somehow forced on me by the data, rather than by a personal inclination, is the importance of social and cultural choices even in the most materialistic aspects of society. Though initially tempted to consider that all technical and economic options could be explained in terms of efficiency and rational choices, I finally had to accept that neither the Neolithic of Greece, nor the Neolithic in general, could be understood in those terms without distorting the data. Even the basic choice of raw materials for stone tools, for instance, can ultimately be shown to be the result of social choices, despite all the technical justifications that the respective qualities of the different raw materials can offer.

Finally, my discussions concerning social organization will be strongly oriented by a rather pessimistic view of human (or even, animal) societies, in which competition and conflicts are seen to be inherent to any group, as are tendencies towards the control of power by a few individuals or groups. Thus, despite the postulated simplicity of these earliest farming communities, I shall not consider it as 'normal' to find no evidence of inter-community conflicts, neither will I find it 'normal' to find no sign of institutionalized hierarchy. The question of how an 'egalitarian' organization was maintained throughout centuries or millennia, despite the potential for accumulation and the necessary differentiation of roles and status, constitutes, for me, as pregnant a problem as the emergence of hierarchies.

However, any given social organization is the outcome of historical processes. Thus, before we can address this question, several other problematic issues must be raised. One of the most controversial concerns the very origins of the Neolithic in Greece. The quasi-absence of data on the Mesolithic, in particular in the regions that will be most densely settled during the Early

Neolithic, is a crucial element in the debate. It can always be claimed, indeed, that 'the absence of evidence is no evidence of absence' and that future field-work will eventually reveal a rich Mesolithic that can be deemed a cultural and economic precursor to the Greek Neolithic. However, I shall argue that the scarcity of Mesolithic sites must be taken at face value, that is, as a reflection of a sparse population that mostly exploited dispersed resources of low energetic yield. Since recent syntheses of the context of emergence of a productive economy show the latter to be linked with opposite conditions (Gebauer and Price 1992), the Mesolithic in Greece does not appear conducive to an autochthonous process of Neolithization. In addition, claims for a local process of Neolithization rely on controversial botanical data and on what I consider to be a misinterpretation of the data from Franchthi and Sidari. Despite a debatable 'continuity' in occupation at these two sites, best interpreted as a sign of contacts, there is a radical break in technical and economic behaviours all over Greece at the dawn of the Neolithic. The simultaneous appearance of radically new techniques and of domesticated species implies the acquisition of a quasi-encyclopedic knowledge which is thoroughly underestimated. I consider that this knowledge, and the relevant know-how, could only be implemented by groups already familiar with farming and building techniques, with stone polishing, pressure-flaking, spinning, that is, by farming groups coming from the Near East.

However, a recurrent argument against the hypothesis of migrant groups is the impossibility of defining precisely their possible origin. That most domesticated species come from the Near East cannot be questioned. But the associated material, despite punctual and varied analogies, does not resemble that of any specific region of the Near East. Here again, I suggest that we take the data at face value, and instead change our model of interpretation. Rather than postulating strong cultural links and looking for a single origin, as with the Danubian 'wave of advance', I propose that we consider the colonization of Greece according to an 'insular model', that is as a maritime process implemented by small pioneer groups, ultimately deriving from different parts of the Levant and Anatolia.

Whether these groups brought pottery with them remains difficult to establish. A long and especially detailed chapter will be devoted to the problem of the 'Initial Neolithic'. Discussions about the presence or absence of pottery in the earliest Neolithic of Greece have been going on for more than thirty years, and a thorough evaluation of the presently available data does not lead to conclusive answers regarding the so-called 'Pre-ceramic Neolithic'. Nevertheless, it can be shown that these levels do represent a very early phase of the Neolithic in Greece. The sherds they contain may be intrusive or correspond to a phase of limited and 'intermittent' production of pottery, as occurs in the Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B of the Near East. In both cases, however, these deposits reflect a different attitude towards pottery production and use than during the

later phases of the Early Neolithic. Whether or not 'pre-pottery', this phase ought to be distinguished from the Early Neolithic proper.

Marked regional contrasts in the density and nature of settlements characterize the spread of the farming economy over Greece.⁴ At the level of resolution given by 14C dates, no regular 'wave of advance' can be brought to light. To the contrary, it can be shown that, already by the Early Neolithic, the very different socioeconomic pathways that characterize the development of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age societies in northern and southern Greece are rooted in opposite social conditions. On a broad level, Early Neolithic settlement is restricted to the dryer part of Greece, whose climate was closer to that of the Near East. However, whereas access to water was clearly not a limiting factor in Thessaly, the foundation of villages in the Peloponnese seems to have been constrained by the availability of well-watered, fertile soils near springs, lakes or marshes. As a result, villages were few and far between, creating social conditions opposite to that of the densely settled Thessaly.

In this respect Thessaly, whose settlement patterns will be studied in more detail, must be seen as the exception rather than the rule. Various environmental factors, such as the possibility of flood-farming or access to various micro-environments, have been invoked to explain the location of settlements over this vast alluvial plain. The results of the present analyses, conducted on eastern Thessaly, contradict these models. Early Neolithic settlement patterns are characterized by an extremely dense and homogeneous network of villages, spreading in all directions, independently of topographic, hydrologic or pedologic factors. They must be seen instead as the result of socioeconomic factors, in an interplay between demography, political regulation, social obligations and agrarian work.

The importance of cereal cultivation and domesticated plants in the diet has, however, been challenged recently. Yet, various calculations show that, even within the very small territories reconstructed in Thessaly, recourse to wild plants or animals as a complement to the diet would not have been necessary. In addition, while taphonomic biases can always cast doubt on the importance of wild plant food, the scarcity of wild animals in the faunal remains demonstrates that wild resources were not only under-exploited, but deliberately neglected. Only strong symbolic oppositions between the wild and the domestic, and the will to assert one's domestication of space, can explain the neglect of wild food resources, but also of local lithic resources and such natural habitats as caves and rock shelters.

It is indeed characteristic of the Early Neolithic that caves, previously favoured and abundantly reoccupied in the Late and Final Neolithic, are almost deserted. The habitat is man-made, clustered, and permanently occupied over

⁴ Greece will be considered here within its present political borders. With few exceptions, the latter correspond to natural boundaries (mountains or seas).

many generations. If the general pattern of these tell-like villages is very stable, the details of the houses and building techniques are, to the contrary, extremely variable. In contrast to what occurs in the Early Neolithic of Danubian tradition, house style is not used in the definition of a group's identity. I suggest that this may be related to the very permanence of the village itself. By its antiquity and conspicuous visibility, the village materializes the links to the past, the continuity of the community and its ancestral rights over its territory. In this context, individuality and the will to assert one's difference could thus be expressed without endangering the collectivity.

Within these small territories, located in fertile alluvial plains, most villages would not have had direct access to the raw materials needed for the daily used tools and equipment. This simple observation should, by itself, cast doubts on the presumed self-sufficiency of these Neolithic societies. More specific arguments indicate that, in the case of Greece, various forms of specialized production were already occurring by the Early Neolithic. Part-time craft specialization was a basis of socioeconomic organization long before the emergence of centralized political powers. Indirect procurement through exchange from specialized groups can be suggested, for instance, for chipped stone tools, in particular for obsidian and honey-flint blades. However, the differences brought to light between the procurement, production and use of pottery, chipped stone tools and ornament, suggest that craft specialization corresponded to a multicentric economy, where specialization and exchange answered social and possibly ritual functions as well as economic needs. The production of pottery, in particular, goes against familiar assessments and demonstrates the importance of social choices over 'utilitarian' ones: Early Neolithic pottery was, probably consciously, kept out of the domestic functions of cooking and storing food. It was deemed more useful as a means of social display or for rituals, which probably explains, incidentally, why hearths and ovens were so elaborately constructed.

The other crafts practised within the villages are less well documented. Understanding the role of bone tools, the function and status of polished stone tools, the ambiguous evidence pertaining to spinning and weaving, and the possible function of several common but enigmatic objects, remains a challenge. The same can be said about the numerous figurines, predominantly feminine. Most plausibly, they served several functions, including mundane ones. Yet, the new social and economic constraints induced by a sedentary, farming life were bound to have consequences on beliefs and rituals. Denying the figurines all ritual function appears, on the whole, a more costly hypothesis than the reverse. One argument that sustains an interpretation of ritual use is the strong correlation between the presence of figurines and the density of settlement. Figurines were needed where interaction was at the highest between neighbouring communities. It is thus probable that they were used in various rituals that ultimately served as a means of integration within a more complex society.

Whatever the case, figurines were related to the world of the living. Perhaps even to the very notion of life itself, but never, during the Early Neolithic, were they related to the realm of the dead. Funerary rituals have been commonly described as especially 'simple': the dead casually buried in pits, in between the houses, without grave goods. I shall argue, to the contrary, that the majority of the burials that we can observe, the intramuros pit burials, are actually the exceptions. That they correspond to individuals who were denied 'normal' funerary rituals (*sensu stricto*), the latter being exemplified by the small cremation burial ground from Soufli Magoula. This reversal of perspective leads to the conclusion that funerary rituals, far from been 'simple', were in fact highly invested and demanding in terms of labour, time and energy.

Nevertheless, one element of the previous interpretations still holds true. Judging from the composition of the cremated population and the grave goods, no sign of 'inequality' can be brought to light. There is indeed no evidence of permanent, transmitted hierarchical status, but various indirect evidence points to an heterarchical organization, with well-differentiated roles and status. The reciprocal interdependence created by such a social organization, together with kinship ties and obligations, would have been instrumental in limiting conflict within the village community. A similar mechanism may have existed between communities. The density of villages in Thessaly was bound to create frequent occasions for potential conflict. Yet, there is no indication of widespread hostility between the various villages. The above-mentioned relation between figurines as well as other objects of special value, and the density of settlement already suggests that rituals participated in mechanisms of social interaction and integration. In addition, given the reliance on trade and exchange even when it was not strictly necessary, I suggest that 'arbitrary specialization' may also have been at play to regulate interactions between the different communities.

The latter hypotheses are, at most, plausible guesses. I do not claim to have solved the many problems that initially motivated this work. Even many factual queries remain unsettled by lack of fieldwork or proper analytical studies. No synthesis can go beyond the present state of the research, and the history of Neolithic research in Greece has not led to a very propitious situation.

Early in the century, the pioneering work of G. Tsountas at Sesklo and Dimini (Tsountas 1908), followed by the syntheses of Wace and Thompson on Thessaly (Wace and Thompson 1912) and Heurtley on Macedonia (Heurtley 1932), had already revealed how rich and often spectacular was the Neolithic in Greece. Despite this early interest and the quality of the work, the organization of archaeological research in Greece, which was geared towards the exploration of the prestigious Classical past, as well as a tendency to consider the Greek Neolithic as a poorer offshoot of the Near Eastern or Balkanic Neolithic, led to a long period of dormancy. Active research programmes were resumed in the 1960s under two distinct influences: in the north, the Germanic 'historico-cultural' tradition focused exclusively on chronological frameworks and

'cultures', with very little anthropological perspective; in the south, the Anglo-Saxon school emphasized economic and environmental reconstructions, focusing on individual sites or discrete 'styles', and neglected supraregional frameworks. In all cases, excavations were mostly limited to small parts of the sites. The Greek scholar D. Theocharis stood out as an exception, with his broad interests, in-depth knowledge of the Greek Neolithic as a whole, and extensive excavations at Sesklo. Unfortunately, his premature death still deprives us of a synthesis of his work on this major settlement. Elsewhere, most excavations consisted of small test soundings, often determined and limited by rescue work.

More recently, the Greek Neolithic has again become an active and pioneering field of research. Its strength and interest lie less in the number or scale of the excavations proper, than in the number and variety of innovative methodological studies. Most aspects of the archaeological research have been renewed: systematic field surveys, site definition, regional analysis, faunal analysis, ceramic technology, ethno-archaeological fieldwork, and so forth. These have been admirably reported in a recent publication by E. Alram-Stern (1996) and illustrated by a major exhibit (Papathanassopoulos (ed.) 1996), while several important syntheses, both regional and general, have recently updated the chronocultural frameworks and the remaining problems (Andreou *et al.* 1996; Coleman 1992; Davis 1992; Grammenos 1997).

But even older and more traditional publications can yield important information, when suitably interrogated. Renewed research lies as much in new questions and a new way of looking at the data as in new fieldwork. More fundamentally, I believe it is time we go beyond a simple statement of facts to investigate the deeper structure of these unique, pioneering societies. However important the lacunae, I consider it our duty to try and make sense of what is available at a given moment. Even though all my conclusions must be considered provisional, they should renew the on-going discussions and indicate fruitful perspectives for further research.