

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84241-9 - The Early Mediterranean Village: Agency, Material Culture, and Social Change in Neolithic Italy

John Robb

Excerpt

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ONE:
THEORIZING NEOLITHIC ITALY



O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

William Butler Yeats, *Among School
Children* (Yeats 1962, p. 117)

He neglected friend and relatives, and when he met one of them in the street (going to or from his office) he found it hard to carry on a sensible conversation. He grew more and more appalled at how little people knew of the 1st of September 1973. . . . The Subject turned out to be just about inexhaustible. Who would have guessed that so much had happened on exactly the 1st of September 1973?

Tor Age Bringsvaerd, “The Man Who Collected the First of September, 1973” (Bringsvaerd 1976, p. 79)

A SENSE OF LOYALTY

I became an archaeologist because I wanted to study *people*. All too often, however, I find myself writing about *things*. Sometimes it's things for their own sake: “This field season we dug up 20,000 undecorated potsherds and 3 decorated ones. . . .” Sometimes I write about people, but with the usual tacit proviso that people are important only as far as they can be related to the corpus of 20,003 potsherds.

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As a way of seeing the past, this is unsatisfactory. Our archaeological bookshelf is littered with the textual equivalents of nineteenth-century museums, display cases with rows of rigidly positioned arrowheads with faded labels: humanity subordinated to the geometry of the glass box. Even our attempts to escape the mental prison of artefacts often result merely in lifelike, frozen dioramas with only the surfaces of people. Lifelike, not living: caricatures of people, ancient shadows driven by single winds of tradition, food, sex, power, or identity. Do the people in our works act with a subtlety and a complexity that we recognise in ourselves? Infrequently. Do these works allow us to truly recognise the cultural differences of the past? Almost never.

Southern Italy between 6000 and 3500 BC is completely unremarkable. It is neither dynamic nor rapidly changing. It is not megalithic or monumental. There are no “high-status” burials. There is very little in the way of “hot technologies” – the metalwork, exotic goods, cult gear, or monuments which we have traditionally endowed with archaeological *mana*. It is a past of people simply getting on with their own lives. People like this often do not furnish helpful fodder for our stories about adaptation, inequality, or meaning – and in consequence, they are normally relegated to negative, residual categories such as “tribes” and almost completely left out of archaeological narratives.

Human *ordinariness* is an extraordinary accomplishment: it is the sheer ability of humans to believe and to act. This book is motivated by a sense of loyalty to the ordinary past. Throughout human history, most people have not been the scheming political elites, profoundly religious megalith users, or the other categories of actors who populate the pages of archaeological theory. If we do not theorise about ordinary people, if we assume that they are mere bricks in the fabric of society, we leave the great bulk of our subject uninvestigated. Similarly, ordinary material culture – the undecorated body sherd, the casual flake – forms the vast bulk of all archaeological collections. If we theorise only about “hot technologies” rather than about everything that the archaeological record affords us, we are throwing away most of our data. Ordinary life provides an extraordinary impetus to theory, a cliff-face which affords few handholds: if we can understand the agency of ordinary life, we can understand anything in the past.

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One ambition of this work, thus, is to tell the story of the ordinary past – of the women, men, and children whose life stories make up the substance of remote millennia. I attempt to provide a systematic introduction to the Italian Neolithic – systematic not in the sense of covering every archaeological manifestation of this long and diverse period, but in attempting to think about as many dimensions of human experience as possible. If, in the process, this book also provides an entrée into this fascinating time and place, I will be pleased. Beyond this, the goal of archaeology is not to discover what social theorists knew yesterday, nor to rewrite the last good ethnography that we have read against a dimmed, distant backdrop. No other discipline commands our time, depth, and ability to see long-term general patterns – few other fields take material culture as seriously – and we stand increasingly alone in our ability to study nonstate societies. Hence, the second goal of this book is to trace the linkages between ordinary life and long-term history, between people acting in the short term and the larger patterns of both change and conservatism which we see unfolding across entire regions and down through the millennia. I hope to trace how humans make their history on a scale beyond experience of a single lifetime.

Finally, with theory as with cooking, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. This book presents an interpretation of early Mediterranean villages; the theoretical agenda outlined here is grounded in ideas about agency, material culture, and social change which are summarised briefly in this chapter. The title of this book also pays homage to Flannery's *The Early Mesoamerican Village* (Flannery 1976). I first encountered Flannery's book in 1984, as an ex-student of Middle English literature trying to understand what archaeology was all about. The theoretical landscape has shifted immensely over the last three decades. I have tried to avoid the sterile polemics which afflicted archaeology in the 1980s and 1990s, and Flannery's research agenda contained the precocious seeds of many current concerns. Still, much of what follows would probably look equally alien to the Real Mesoamerican (or Mediterranean) Archaeologist, the Great Synthesizer, and the Skeptical Graduate Student (who no doubt has since been afflicted with skeptical graduate students of his own). Yet one of the principal lessons of *The Early Mesoamerican Village* was that archaeological theory benefits more from studies which road-test

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ideas on the ground than from purely theoretical manifestos, and, if the goal of theory is to help us to understand the past, good theory will always be self-effacing.

So this book is an experiment in writing, an attempt to write about the past differently to reach and to understand a different kind of past. Fulfilling these ambitions completely is impossible – but I have learned a lot in trying.

SOME NECESSARY CONCEPTS

Social Reproduction

All interpretations of the past rely upon some general idea of human nature. Sometimes it lurks buried beneath deep strata of archaeological minutia; sometimes it occupies center stage with the archaeology as a coda to the philosophical meditation; but it is always there. Much of the 1960s and 1970s debate between culture historical and processual archaeology, for example, revolved around whether it is more useful to conceptualise humans as passive reproducers of tradition or as ecological organisms, just as much of the 1980s and 1990s theory wars between processualism and post-processualism hinged on whether we must theorise that humans are motivated by universal concerns, such as prestige or survival, or by the particular symbols of their own culture.

Although theory is omnipresent, it is also a tool; and one yardstick for a theory is whether it helps us to understand a particular archaeological problem. In this book, I address the relationship between agency and daily life – a challenge succinctly stated by Yeats in the poem *Among School Children*. To answer this question, we have to consider the relationship between action and actor, between long-term structures and fleeting moments. Precisely because this philosophical ground is so fundamental, it has been worked over many times. In this chapter, I do not review the many different points of view on this issue in social theory but briefly summarise the basic principles underlying the interpretation presented in this book.

Social theorists prior to Marx and Engels essentialised human nature. It was assumed either that people acted in accordance with their universal nature as humans, or in accordance with their particular fixed

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nature as savages, civilised Europeans, and so forth. Such views did not vanish instantly with the publication of *The German Ideology*, of course; indeed, in Victorian social evolution and culture history these views continued to be influential until well into the twentieth century. But what Marx and Engels did was to put human action and consciousness systematically into relation to social context:

The model of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men [sic] that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. (Marx 1978, p. 4)

People develop their capacity for acting through participating in social and economic relations. Human activity, therefore, changes two things: it produces a product or effect in the external world, and it shapes the actor's consciousness as a specific kind of being capable of acting within particular social and economic relationships.

The insight that social life must be understood dialectically was left neglected or considered to be implicit through much of twentieth-century social theory. In the 1970s, however, both Giddens (1979) and Bourdieu (1977) returned to this theme in reaction to models dominated by system and structure (cf. Ortner 1984; Sahlins 1981). Giddens begins with a critique of classical sociology centered upon role, rules, and institutions. If it is true that people act in accordance with structures, where do these structures come from? How do people vary them? How do the structures change? To answer these questions, Giddens proposes a dialectical approach in which action is the outcome of rules which it recursively organises. Bourdieu, reacting principally against structuralism, based his work on a parallel insight. Humans act in accordance with learned cultural structures which Bourdieu calls *habitus*, an ingrained system of dispositions which provide the basis for regulated improvisation. Reciprocally, *habitus* is never formulated rigidly; people infer its basic principles from a multitude of disparate cultural behaviours. Even though *habitus* has considerable inertia, changes in cultural behaviour have the potential eventually to change it. Note that, although a naïve reading would equate *structures* with social restraint and determination

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and *action* with individual intention and freedom, for both Bourdieu and Giddens, structures are not only restrictive but are also productive; structures enable one to act. Put another way, one cannot exist as an undifferentiated, essential specimen of humanity, but only as a specific kind of person in a specific social situation.

In social and archaeological theory, humans' capacity to act is often discussed under the rubric of "agency" (Barrett 2001; Dobres 2001; Dobres and Robb 2000; Dobres and Robb 2005; Dornan 2002; Flannery 1999; Gardner 2004; Gell 1998; Giddens 1979; Johnson 1989; Joyce and Lopiparo 2005; Ortner 1984; Sewell 1992; Shanks and Tilley 1987). Agency should be construed in terms of the dialectics of social reproduction rather than being equated narrowly with the self-interested efforts of political actors to accomplish their individual ambitions, as is sometimes done in archaeological discussion of ancient social change. In our own experience as agents, intention is often the most salient part of our experience of action. But human action also embodies and reproduces the totality of conceptual structures and social relations within which such an act is possible. To take a poignant example, consider the painful irony of a solemn academic seminar on racial and class exclusion conducted entirely by university-educated, middle-class white people (McCall 1999, pp. 18–19). The earnest intention is to confront social exclusion, but the occasion inherently perpetuates a system in which, as McCall notes, conventionally agreed practices of language, space, bodily demeanor, and deference

serve to delineate the linguistic territory of academic discourse, complete with all the nuances of race, gender, and class that language carries. . . . These structural relations are not concerned with the validity of what a particular speaker says but with the institutional legitimacy of events such as this, positioned in places such as this. Our participation, our agency, constitutes the social through these arrangements independently of the trajectory of our intentions. Indeed, often our intention is to militate against the very system whose structures we reproduce in speaking and acting – note, for instance, academic forums on and against racism within our system of higher education, which through its

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deployments of cultural authority continually reproduces the privileges associated with acting, speaking, and thinking “white.” (McCall 1999, pp. 18–19)

Intentions are mobilised within specified fields of discourse, and they cannot result in action until they are localised within recognised and rule-bound genres of behaviour. Genres of action are woven from external and internalised rules, norms, layers of prescription, obligation, habit, assumption, and belief. Tracing this line of thought further, any intended action presupposes a multitude of structures, arrangements, and conditions which must be true, or provided, or in conformity with a norm, for the action both to exist as a possibility and then be brought to pass. It follows that one effect of action, and quite possibly the principal one, is to reproduce these conditions and structures which enable it (Barrett 2001, p. 62).

Social reality, thus, is continuously generated through individual action – through ordinary actions whose proximate aim is to accomplish some specific task at hand. Agency, thus, exists neither as a quality of agonistic individuals nor of determining settings and structures, but in the “grey zone” (Levi 1988) of action between them. The intentional pursuit of goals is possible only through complicity with power structures, cultural ideas, and ways of behaving – parameters of a situation that people enter into and normally accept as part of the situation. This has two general implications for agency theory. First, agency is a relational quality; the concept of agency really applies not to actors in isolation but to the social relations within which they act. Second, we do not act with a universal, reified “agency”; we act with the historically situated agency particular to those relationships. Language affords a parallel: although language is a universal and defining human capability, we do not speak Language but rather English, Italian, Iroquois, or Walbiri. Similarly, although we can discuss human agency in the abstract, when we interpret a social world it makes sense only to speak of particular, contextualised forms of agency – the agency of an early twenty-first-century Western male, or a seventeenth-century Iroquois female, or a Neolithic Italian child. These modes of existence differ and, therefore, make specific forms of agency important objects for archaeological interpretation.

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Material Normality

All human relationships are necessarily material relationships. People know and define themselves and others through their bodies, orient themselves in a material world, carry out physical actions in tangible contexts, communicate through gestures, sound, and visual clues, and participate in a continued flow of substances – food, images, things, substances, work, and so forth. Even transcendental contact with the immaterial normally requires particular places, bodily attitudes, and paraphernalia. Materiality is fundamental to social life (Miller 2005). Moreover, we cannot think in isolation from the material world, which provides both sensory information and an extended cognitive system (Malafouris 2005), and cultural ideas must be expressed in material things to be deployed politically (DeMarrais, Castillo, and Earle 1996).

“The most important vehicle of reality maintenance is conversation” (Berger and Luckmann 1967, p. 172). Yet, conversation itself is a material process. We talk to others about things and actions we understand as materially existing; even when discussing the immaterial, we talk in particular material contexts, using apparatus (books, images, dress, gestures) and often with material referents for the intangible. Moreover, conversation, broadly speaking, is a chain of action through which understandings of the world are shared, checked and validated, transacted, and modified, and such chains of action are as much material as linguistic. If I make a pot by using techniques learned from other potters and idioms shared with others, in the expectation that they will see it, use it and understand it in certain ways, I am effectively conducting a material conversation with them.

Beyond material conversations, social reality is a material construction. “The reality of everyday life is organised around the “here” of my body and the “now” of my present” (Berger and Luckmann 1967, p. 36), and these are physical orientations of the body, space, and time. Moreover, as Bourdieu points out in his discussion of doxa, the undiscussed, silent, enduring presence of material things can be a powerful force in granting these things the status of immanent realities. Material things possess duration and spatial extension which may pre-exist any particular project and which renders them settings and conditions for any planned action. Perceiving and negotiating the material world

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is an inescapable part of action. Finally, the material world contains inescapable processes which involve fundamental ambiguities which must be theorised. It is not surprising that many of the central loci of social reproduction involve necessary and inevitable transformations: the development of bodily difference in sex and age; the transformation of physical matter into bodies via social foodways; work and production as the transformation and circulation of physical world; and death as transformation of bodies into other material states and kinds of beings.

Because social reality is a material construction, there are many ways in which archaeologists can investigate it fruitfully. What follows is a brief, and necessarily selective, review of some avenues of investigation which will be pursued in this case study.

FRAMEWORKS AND ORIENTATIONS: TIME, SPACE, LANDSCAPES, AND HISTORIES: “Place” rather than “space” has become almost a theoretical cliché, yet the central points are important. To summarise a vast literature briefly (Barrett 1994; Leone 1984; Parker, Pearson, and Richards 1994; Shanks and Tilley 1987; Tilley 1994):

1. People orient themselves and act within culturally constituted landscapes built up of places, general zones, and networks of paths. These landscapes are heterogeneous and discontinuous: they contain places created by the actors themselves and known intimately, places frequented periodically or under unusual circumstances, and places inaccessible from personal experience. The same is true for temporalities (Bradley 1991; Gosden 1994). Knowledge of landscapes is built up of equally heterogeneous materials, from daily practices, architectural structuring, and depositional practices, through long-distance travel, second- or third-hand report, story, legend, rite, or prejudice.
2. *Space* and *time* are understood materially, and are rarely separated. Other places are understood as possessing different temporalities and vice versa (Lowenthal 1985). Places are often understood experientially in terms of the time needed to reach them or traverse them. Time is made material via *time marks* or *memory anchors* which make the passage of time visible in the

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perceived landscape (Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990). Moreover, the alternative major metaphor for understanding temporality, processes of growth and development (such as seasonal rhythms and the human lifespan) also have spatial referents – annual rhythms of activities, points of memory for human life stories, and historical moments fixing and synchronizing many human lives. Hence, memory and landscape are mutually constructed (Edmonds 1999). The “temporality of the landscape” is eloquently expressed in Ingold’s concept of *taskscape*, the congealed sum of the activities carried out in a landscape over time (Ingold 2000).

3. Although such cultural landscapes can sometimes be summarised synoptically (Bourdieu 1977; Ortiz 1969), because spatial and temporal orders are produced in practices, cultural landscapes are situated. Agents with different regimes of activity may possess different understandings of landscape and timescape. Such differentials in spatial enabledness form a component of the agencies needed to practice specific activities.
4. Space and time may also become a political resource, through differential knowledge (Helms 1983), or through acts of reference such as intentional exoticism, the rejection of difference, conscious anachronism, and the reinvention of tradition (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1993), or the rejection of it.

Because spatiality and temporality are built up from heterogeneous concepts and practices, archaeologically, we must investigate them through the convergence of multiple analyses. No single field of practice such as ritual, trade, travel, or work can bring to light an encompassing sense of order such as Foucault’s (1977) concept of discipline. Investigation must extend across fields of practice and require a range of tactics. In the following analysis, these investigations include discussion of how people created fixed points through the placement of settlement and architecture, how enduring human marks provided histories and memories for the past, and how particular uses of landscapes provided sources of knowledge and meaning. A central concept is “frequentation,” the sedimentation of daily experience in particular places, which draws upon both Ingold’s concept of the *taskscape* and the idea of