



World archaeology

Archaeology: The Development of Society

Phil Perkins

The hilly flanks hypothesis suggests that in addition to occupying a particular ecological niche, where suitable plants and animals thrived, the shift to agriculture also involved changes in human cognition, as people developed the skills needed for successful farming. If we look beyond the mechanisms of subsistence, we can discern that there is more to daily life than just ensuring that people were fed.

Chris Scarre

If you look at it in a very, very broad context of, you know, have different species, and different hominid species, have chosen a route by which to succeed – to reproduce, to grow in numbers – modern humans have done it as much as anything by being cognitively flexible. Not particularly strong or fast. We can only survive in these different parts of the world through clothing and fire and things, but what we are very good at is the sort of cognitive ability and cognitive flexibility. And that isn't just a mechanical thing, which shows itself through effective hunting or clever subsistence or technology, but equally, you have got to think about the ways in which they related to their understanding of the cosmos, and what they thought, where their position was in a wider universe, and the ways in which they turned thoughts and concepts into symbolic material items, which goes all the way from things like cave art in a sense to writing in another sense, which often in a sense is a representation of concepts and ideas. It's something which creates the world around us. We create a sort of a visionary world, almost, for ourselves in which we live.

Phil Perkins

In recent decades archaeology has questioned more deeply the ways in which humans have carried out their daily lives, and the results have revealed a richer dimension of the human past than was previously suspected. Trevor Watkins has noted a marked difference in the nature of archaeological finds in Southwest Asia.

Trevor Watkins

If you go back in the literature to the 1970s, then you will find people talking about villages, Abu Hureyra, Jericho, Jarmo, and the intensive production of cultivated foodstuffs and meat from herded animals. Then you get sometime in the 1980s the sites which archaeologists have come across have changed their nature. We have had hardly any village sites with just farmers going about their everyday business of producing foodstuffs. Almost every site from the 1980s and particularly through the 1990s that's been turned up has had quite extraordinary additional factors like peculiar architecture, and Çatalhöyük was the precursor of that. They patently spent a lot of time with their architecture, with the decoration of their architecture, painting, sculpting, modelling.

Phil Perkins

Clearly, agriculture was not the only new aspect of human life. A built environment was also developing. But how can we detect cognition and symbolic behaviour in what we find? What does it look like when you brush the dirt from the top of it?

Trevor Watkins

Well, the site where it really hit me between the eyes was Qermez Dere in northern Iraq. When we got the construction worked out, the next thing that began to hit us was that they have actually changed the shape of the building – they have replaced the building. They have taken the roof off and they have put inside it free-standing sculpted pillars, pairs of them. And we could see that the tops of these were far too low to support the roof. These are free-standing lumps, if you like, blocks, in the middle of the floor actually, one on either side of the axis of the building. And they are being tended to and they are being replastered and they are being remodelled and reshaped, so you can see that although they are only a lump of rock they were conceived as in some way anthropomorphic. Whether they are human, whether they are supernatural, whether they are gods, whether they are ancestors, who knows?

Chris Scarre

There are, I think, very similar sorts of developments in Western Europe, the area I am familiar with. In a sense they really post-date the beginnings of agriculture. That's to say that at least the domesticated crops, domesticated animals, have made an appearance in Western Europe before you begin to get very clear signs of the elaboration of cognitive thought. But one of the problems in saying that is that it partly depends on having the remains. The pre-farming period in Western Europe, the Mesolithic, the period between the end of the last Ice Age and the beginnings of farming, which in Britain for instance runs from around ten or eleven thousand years ago to around six thousand years ago, in which we know that there were some cognitively complex behaviours. We have occasional evidence for symbolic objects, but not very much. So we don't know how extensive it was. But once you get to the beginnings of the Neolithic and you get the construction of monuments, megalithic monuments and things of that kind, then you can see quite complicated behaviours, which involve the manipulation of materials, the carving and the shaping of the materials in certain ways, and also the use of the human body very often. I mean, Trevor was talking about anthropomorphism in pillars and you certainly get a sort of anthropomorphism in the use of some of the stones that are used in monuments.

Phil Perkins

But there is also another aspect of these early farming settlements. Human remains have been found in many early Neolithic settlements in Southwest Asia, famously at Çatalhöyük and Jericho. But why were human remains deposited in houses?

Trevor Watkins

The first thing to say about what are they doing, this is not disposal of the dead because at no site do we have enough bodies to represent the population of the settlement at any time. Even at Çatalhöyük, which has the biggest concentration of burials. So they are selective. At Qermez Dere we had a whole series of houses and going through a whole series of iterations in the case of one house and only fragments of a few skulls. Gary Rowlandson, excavating 'Ain Ghazal, found there were human bodies thrown in what he calls the trash pits, the rubbish pits contain not only animal

bone and all the other debris of everyday life, but whole human corpses just thrown in without ceremony. So that the bodies which were buried with ceremony and ritual in the houses are not the whole population. They are selected. Why they are selected we don't know, but if you start from the point that these are dead bodies, these are the remains of members of the community. Where there is only a half a dozen burials they don't interfere with one another. In other words, people remember. So I like to think of it as like having a picture of granny on the mantelpiece. These are important members of the community who died, but who are retained in the household. And this is part of the importance of the household, I think.

Phil Perkins

We have gone from the origins of agriculture to the household. In addition to the changes in subsistence strategies, these developments in the symbolic world of the early Neolithic farmers surely show that societies were developing more complex forms of thought and expression. And one aspect of the symbolic behaviour is how the dead were commemorated, and how people linked themselves to an individual place, a home, by venerating their ancestors.