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## Julian Tomas: Rethinking the Neolithic

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types of tombs. There are also a great many so-called non-megalithic grave forms of the TRB, such as the stone-packing graves in Denmark.

A great variety of burial ceremonies were practised by the TRB groups. The author underlines that the Mesolithic traditions are strongly reflected in some of the early TRB burials. She also deals with the chamber compartments, which have been of special interest to the reviewer. According to Midgley, the North-European funerary tradition is a local phenomenon. However, it certainly was not developed in total isolation from the rest of Europe.

The development of the social system depends on ecological, technological, demographic and political factors and probably it has changed over time and within the different regions in a dynamic way.

We have a rather good knowledge of the TRB chronology in different regions. About the emergence we can trace a background in some hunter-gatherer groups and neighbouring farmers to the south. But to determine the end of the TRB culture is difficult because we have to consider the

Globular Amphora culture as well as the Corded Ware culture, which was the successor of the TRB. In some areas it is possible to follow the gradual change to the Corded Ware culture.

In Midgley's own opinion the recognition of the culture dynamics is the most significant observation to emerge from her investigations. There are two environmentally different groups: (a) the northern, eastern and western group (lowland); and (b) the southern and southeastern group (loess belt). These different types of landscape influenced the economy and the settlement system.

Midgley's book is indeed a very good, sometimes brilliant survey of a large and extremely difficult material, which the author has studied with considerable energy and enthusiasm. In view of her special background and knowledge of material and publications in the eastern part of the TRB area, I cannot think of anyone more qualified to write this kind of survey. I think we have to congratulate Magdalena Midgley—and ourselves—for this excellent book.

Julian Thomas: *Rethinking the Neolithic*. (New Studies in Archaeology). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991. xvi + 212 pp. 60 figures. ISBN 0-521-40377-4 (hardback).

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Archaeology in the last decade of the 20th century is characterized by a multiplicity of trends inspired by a variety of philosophical currents. The different archaeologies, which are often contradictory in character, amalgamate and renew the experiences and theories, methods and interpretations of several centuries of archaeology. They are an expression of our chaotic times, where international and national circumstances influence the way individuals or groups seek to understand what is actually happening around them. Different political outlooks give rise to different types of archaeology: e.g. the politicians in parliament, archaeologists in the academies ar-

guing about how we should view the times (whether the past, the present or the future).

For several years, post-processual archaeology, particularly in England, has been involved in a critical study of earlier archaeologies. With its critical and relativist standpoint, it has encouraged a deliberate pluralism as regards interpretations of prehistory. It has become possible to write about 'everything'.

It is in this light that one should read Julian Thomas's *Rethinking the Neolithic*. This is an example of a book in the post-processual spirit; it is not only a critique of the work of other archaeologists, but also an attempt to create an

understanding (or several understandings?) of one period; the Neolithic in southern England.

Thomas chooses to discuss the Neolithic on the basis of thematic and diachronic studies. By selecting different aspects of Neolithic life, he lets us glimpse the complexities of the period and the complexities of writing prehistory.

Chronologically, the work spans the period from 3200 to 1700 BC, that is, the time from the first Neolithic pottery until just after the start of Beaker pottery. Chorologically, Thomas studies a well-known region in English archaeology; six counties in the central and western part of southern England.

The author's aspiration is to study changes through time and place and thereby to narrow down the problem of what 'the Neolithic' actually is all about. As in all post-processual works, there are references to post-structuralism and hermeneutics, and to well-known philosophers (Bourdieu, Derrida, Foucault, Ricoeur, etc.). Thomas chooses to use a 'genealogical' approach, that is, a type of understanding according to which situations arise as a result of a number of interacting circumstances. Inspired by Ricoeur, he chooses to write *History-as-Analogue*, which makes it possible for him to write the history he desires.

Thomas's challenge is to reveal different messages from the past by reading landscape and material culture as texts. He selects different types of archaeological source material (monuments, depositional practices, portable artefacts, that is, pottery and mortuary practices) so that for every type of material he writes a separate narrative, and then these narratives are weighed up against one another, compared and extended. Thomas chooses the narratives which he thinks are most valuable for discussion. Gender, for instance, is mentioned only briefly in the chapter on mortuary practices. In my opinion, a consideration of the question of gender relations would have added important aspects to the picture of culture and the changes that took place during the 1500 years discussed in the book.

In the second chapter, 'The Image of a Neolithic Economy', Thomas discusses the meaning of the concept 'the Neolithic'. The term is problematic, and one has a feeling from recent archaeological literature that the use and meaning of the term are unclear, and that most archaeologists are aware of this. He criticizes the usual

view of the Neolithic as an economic phenomenon, synonymous with a 'mixed farming system'. He would prefer to see the Neolithic as 'an integrated conceptual and classificatory system, something to think with'. Or as he also puts it, 'Owning a cow, or an axe, living in a house, or buying one of one's kin in a particular way does not make a person Neolithic. It is the recognition of the symbolic potential of these elements to express a fundamental division of the universe into the wild and the tame which creates the Neolithic world' (p. 13). This concept of the wild versus the tame is the main theme running through the book, but not in such a way that it makes us any the wiser as to the character of 'the Neolithic'. This may be because Thomas completely rules out environmental and economic aspects as significant for an understanding of the Neolithic.

Chapters 3-7 are packed with information of various kinds, particularly ideas about what various aspects of the Neolithic may have been like, and in the rest of this review I shall touch upon some of these.

Inspired by hermeneutics and human geography, Thomas attempts in chapter 3, 'Reading Monuments', to show that the monuments are not so much objects in themselves as transformations of space, and he assumes that these are connected with relations of power in the Neolithic communities. He points out the significance of the monuments for the perception of the landscape and argues that they are obviously symbolic, of significance to economic, ritual, legal and spiritual interests. The various types of monument reflect tradition and renewal, where control of space and movements in the landscape are not strongly accentuated until the late second millennium, in conjunction with the establishment of field systems.

In chapter 4, 'Pits, Pots and Dirt: A Genealogy of Depositional Practices', Thomas takes a closer look at the places where things were deposited during the Neolithic, e.g. pits, causewayed enclosure ditches, long barrow ditches, henge monuments, wet places and hoards. The depositions are considered to be an expression of social and cultural acts in themselves. There are changes through time in the cultural rules that governed what objects are deposited and how. These rules are more clearly pronounced in conjunction with the henge monuments, and are therefore easier to perceive in terms of concepts such as inside-

outside, tame-wild, culture-nature, entrances-exits. The discussions are full of details and ideas, providing inspiration for further studies.

The social rather than the functional role of pottery is emphasized in chapter 5, 'Portable Artifacts: The Case of Pottery'. By studying the decoration and form of the pots and their find contexts, Thomas arrives at the conclusion that the different pottery styles in the Neolithic were used for different purposes. He discusses the significance of Neolithic pottery for such things as ethnicity, social rank, and prestige between individuals in a group and between more or less dominant social groups.

In chapter 6, 'Mortuary Practices', Thomas continues the analysis of Neolithic source material with a study of burial rituals and graves. Since graves are the richest source for the Neolithic, this chapter has a more general character, although the author cites numerous examples to illustrate how mortuary practices changed through time. Thomas seeks to show how customs overlap in both time and space. Burial rituals are considered to represent structures which are to some extent responsible for social reproduction and for the creation of individuals. Thomas somehow demystifies death and looks at mortuary practices clinically by omitting religion and other spiritual values from the analysis.

Chapter 7, 'Regional Sequences of Change', presents a study of changes through time in a spatial perspective. The three areas that are analysed show both similarities and differences, such as, for example, in the use of different types of monument. Thomas shows that large geographical areas which may be perceived as culture areas actually consist of many smaller distinctive districts.

As regards the understanding of the Neolithic, Thomas concludes his book: 'As in any cultural landscape which might be documented by present-day ethnographers, Neolithic Britain can be seen as having been made up of a number of communities whose susceptibility to change varied. The character of this variability must surely be located in differences in social relations, and in particular in the traditions of practice which enabled these societies to reproduce themselves'. The reader may have a vague presentiment of what this might have been like, but unfortunately we drown in a mass of different types of information. Thomas himself evidently has some difficulty in combining the different narratives into a

single Neolithic. Was there perhaps more than one?

There is nothing unique in discussing different types of source material so as to combine them to create a picture of a prehistoric period, but Thomas's approach is a new and fascinating one. The view of what constitutes a Neolithic community is based on the use of different types of archaeological source material and on the reading of this material as texts. Instead of seeing the Neolithic as an economic phenomenon, Thomas's Neolithic is synonymous with a culture where social life and social reproduction can be read from the various ways in which people classified themselves, their surroundings and their artefacts; that is to say, a classification system for human life. The Neolithic becomes a mental and cultural phenomenon.

This book gives a highly condensed version of the English Neolithic, consisting of a huge and varied body of source material. Thomas indicates trends in the Neolithic through his choice of different types of archaeological source material to read. For anyone who is not familiar with the discussion of the English Neolithic and the Neolithic source material as a whole, it is unfortunately difficult to evaluate the copious ideas presented by Thomas. Much of what he writes requires a certain amount of empirical and theoretical background information. For readers outside the 'inner circle' (that is, English archaeologists), the reading of the book is also made more difficult by the scarcity of illustrations. The maps, for example, do not stand on their own, and they are on such a scale that it is difficult for an outsider to follow the analyses of regional differences.

From a Scandinavian point of view, *Rethinking the Neolithic* is a stimulating book, and much of the theoretical and empirical matter is similar to what is currently being discussed in Scandinavia. The book also gives good insight into the way different archaeologists have tackled a variety of questions concerning Neolithic England.

In my judgement, Julian Thomas has written a fascinating book. It is not very accessible, however, and it can be read in many ways (which may be one of the author's intentions). Apart from being a committed discussion of an emotionally charged problem in prehistoric research, the book is also a document of contemporary archaeology. It should therefore be of general interest to all

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archaeologists, regardless of what period they are studying. *Rethinking the Neolithic* is thus an important contribution that encourages us to reflect not just about the Neolithic, but also about how

we can explain or understand prehistory, which is evidently something that can be done in many different ways today.