

CONFERENCE REVIEW

Review of the 3rd Annual Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Research Student Symposium

Barney Harris, Elizabeth R Davis and Victoria Newson

The third Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Research Student Symposium (NEBARSS) was held at the UCL Institute of Archaeology November 18th–19th, 2016. The conference explored how archaeological research can aid our understanding of social change during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age periods (c. 4000–1500 BCE) through the theme ‘anarchy in the UK?’. This theme challenged speakers to create pasts that disrupt or diverge from linear narratives of social evolution and this review outlines the speakers’ responses to this challenge.

Keywords: Neolithic; Bronze Age; Prehistory; Britain; Domestication; Barrows; Monuments

Introduction

The 3rd Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Research Student Symposium (NEBARSS) was held at the UCL Institute of Archaeology November 18th–19th, 2016. The conference explored how archaeological research can aid our understanding of social change during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age periods (c. 4000–1500 BCE). The theme ‘anarchy in the UK?’, challenged speakers to create pasts that disrupt or diverge from linear narratives of social evolution.

UCL’s own Prof. Mike Parker Pearson opened the conference on Friday night with his talk “Back to the Future: Contemporary Issues in British Prehistory”. He raised issues of past and current theorists, discussed a possible third scientific revolution and pondered where we are going post-2010. He argued

that increasingly affordable and advanced analytical techniques (*e.g.* genome sequencing) will lead to a re-exploration of past questions and theories. His paper sparked a lively and productive discussion (**Figure 1**).

Emily Banfield (University of Leicester) opened the second day with her talk “Animal Farm? Domestication, dominance and disciplinary practice”. She sought to reverse the traditional narrative of domestication, arguing instead that humans were domesticated by animals during the Neolithic in Britain. Banfield used isotopic and pottery lipid analyses to discuss the role and meaning of fauna deposits within long barrows. She claimed that rising levels of control transformed human and animal lifeways with significant consequences. Her use of excerpts from Orwell’s *Animal Farm* gave her paper an original and quirky twist.

Seren Griffiths (University of Central Lancashire) then presented her paper, “An everyday story of country folk”, on atypical

*UCL Institute of Archaeology, GB
Corresponding author: Barney Harris
(barnabas.harris.14@ucl.ac.uk)

Neolithic structures (based on construction techniques) from sites in Midfield Basin, Northumberland. She compared them to other local examples of early Neolithic structures and postulated that our previous interpretations of early Neolithic occupation have been overly domesticated. Key themes in her comparison included: regionalism, permanence of settlement, permanent places marked through deposition, mobile occupation, significance of topography and anticipation of the nature of the archaeological record. Her research disrupted the straightforward interpretation of atypical structures that as early Neolithic 'houses' and occupations, providing a new archaeological perspective.

Alexander Aston (University of Oxford) argued in his talk "Domesticating the Mind: The Emergence of Dominance Hierarchies in the Neolithic-Bronze Age Tradition" that hereditary dominance hierarchies can be

recognized as a system of cognitive-developmental niche construction. Specific groups who control important 'energetic bottlenecks' domesticate lesser groups. He offered an assessment of social inequality rooted within the non-linear dynamics of systems across various scales (e.g. evolutionary-ecology to ontogenetic development and social thought).

Katy Whitaker (University of Reading), presented a thought experiment titled "What if... none of the building stones at Stonehenge came from Wiltshire?". She considered the role of the stones from Stonehenge in the past 60 years of debate on Neolithic and early Bronze Age social structures. She created an interactive experience for the audience allowing them to choose the path that the presentation followed; a unique and refreshing academic experience. Whitaker proposed that all of the sarsen stones at Stonehenge (originated from 'foreign' areas. The construction



Figure 1: Dr. Mike Copper from Bradford University, one of the founders of NEBARSS, poses a question to Professor Mike Parker Pearson (Photo credit: Muyang Shi).



Figure 2: Barney Harris delivers his paper on Saturday morning: Renfrew Reloaded (Photo credit: Muyang Shi).

of Stonehenge therefore may have been more 'accretionary' than 'corporate', with different groups bringing special individual stones a wide geographical area. There is no reason to imagine that a powerful chief ordered the construction of Stonehenge, rather, its piecemeal construction may have subtly embodied different group's identities.

Mareike Ahlers (Newcastle University) presented an alternative take on Neolithic long barrows. Titled "Constructing communities—Early Neolithic barrow building reviewed through assemblage theory". Ahlers recast the construction of long barrows as material traces of community identity as opposed to complexes for the ruling elite. Ahlers applied assemblage theory to examine how long barrow building shapes communities. She concluded that long barrows are not simply a result of a community's existence; rather, it is the assemblages coming together, bringing different experiences and impressions

to the building process, that creates the community.

Barney Harris (University College London) continued the theme of monument building with his talk "Renfrew reloaded: the social organisation of monument construction in Neolithic Wessex" (**Figure 2**). Harris aimed to reproduce and expand upon Renfrew's (1973) study into the hours of labour required to construct the Neolithic monuments of Wessex. Harris' research refuted Renfrew's assertion that monuments of different typologies correspond neatly to different levels of labour investment. Rather, Harris revealed local geographical trends in the time spent building monuments that transect monument typology. Where long barrows are concerned, labour may be more confidently associated with their respective viewsheds. Sites with greater viewsheds received a greater overall investment of labour, suggesting that the creation of a

tomb in view of a large expanse of land may have increased the number of individuals involved in building it.

Following lunch, Michael Copper (University of Bradford) demonstrated the relevance of ceramic typology in his engagingly-presented talk: “A Time and a Place for the Unstan Bowl”. Copper broke away from the traditional, ‘monothetic’ categories of pottery which are sharply defined by type vessels, and urged instead a shift toward ‘polythetic’ categories, where vessel types may overlap without being deemed hybrids. Using the example of Unstan type bowls of the Neolithic Orkney Islands, Copper illustrated how pottery carries embodied cultural and social messages of particular salience in specific regions, which in turn reinforce physical similarities. Innovation of the Unstan bowl form was restricted because it carried a particularly important, cross-cultural meaning.

Beatrijs de Groot (University College London) followed with her talk, “Straight outta Konya? The pioneer community of Barcin Höyük and its relationship to the ‘core-zone’”. de Groot discussed how outlying communities northwest from Çatalhöyük differed in cooking techniques and implement manufacture from the core-zone of Çatalhöyük. By examining the variations in ceramic forms, inclusions, and uses, de Groot concluded that while cooking practices seemed to develop in tandem between the core-zone and the pioneer communities, ceramic forms developed independently, leaving room for local interpretations of regional practices.

The next talk was given by Anna Bloxam (University College London), titled “Anarchy in Death? Searching for the ‘missing’ funerary diversity of the British Chalcolithic”. Bloxam posited that preoccupation with the typical ‘Beaker’ burial phenomenon has overshadowed the prevalence of other burial forms. Ultimately, she asserted that cremation was practiced from the Late Neolithic through to the Early Bronze Age, overturning the traditional narrative of burial practices for this period and raising important questions over

whether burials could be divided by ethnic or class identity.

Tara Copplestone and Izzy Bartley (University of York and University of Aarhus) jointly presented “Branching a Line: Exploring the Pluralistic Nature of Çatalhöyük through a Multilinear Digital Game”. Combining computer science, digital media, and archaeology to create an interactive multilinear game for Çatalhöyük visitors. Players choices influenced how their narrative unfolds, highlighting the power of individual agency, multiple narratives, and the intangible, deeply human aspects of life at Çatalhöyük. This work represents a fascinating frontier for public engagement, and invites archaeologists to critically reflect the use of technology to interpret and communicate data.

The penultimate presentation was given by Penelope Foreman (Bournemouth University), titled “The Colour Out of Space: Colour in the Monuments of Neolithic Atlantic Europe”. Foreman examined how colour, specifically the classic triad of red-white-black, provides insight into ancient experiences. An examination of colour in megalithic monuments—in relation to texture, the materiality of the stone, regional or temporal occurrence—allowed Foreman to construct socially meaningful networks based on observation.

The conference concluded with Dr. Joanna Brück’s (Bristol University) keynote lecture, “Mortuary Practices and Social Evolution in Early Bronze Age Britain”. Dr. Brück gave a wonderfully visual presentation, featuring high quality photographs of a range of fascinating grave goods from the Amesbury archer burial and burials at Boscombe (Wiltshire), Redlands Farm (Northamptonshire), Dryburn Bridges (East Lothian) and Wilsford (Wiltshire). She argued grave goods may not be the property of the deceased individual. Rather, collections of items such as the flint caches placed nearby the Amesbury archer might in fact have been produced by mourners at, or as part of, the burial. Lavish grave goods and fragments of other deceased individuals in burials may reflect relationships

between the living and the deceased. Calling into question the notion of highly decorated, individual burials representing an 'individualizing', increasingly socially-stratified society.

The speakers successfully presented alternative interpretations of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age archaeology from many well-known monuments, sites and regions. The nuanced arguments frequently disrupted prevailing linear narratives of social evolution, emphasising the importance of regionality, individual agency, and social networks. Overall, the conference felt like a great success with both presenters and attendees leaving feeling stimulated and excited about the future of research in this field. Whilst previous archaeological studies and interpretations form the backbone of any future research in the field, the symposium highlighted the importance of critically evaluating received wisdom and conventional opinion within archaeology. More than ever, Childe's view on conservative thinking comes to mind:

"Men cling passionately to old traditions and display intense reluctance to modify customary modes of

behavior, as innovators at all times have found to their cost. The dead-weight of conservatism, largely a lazy and cowardly distaste for the strenuous and painful activity of real thinking, has undoubtedly retarded human progress..." Childe (1936: 31).

A selection of presentations and photos from the symposium is available online at <http://nebarss.wordpress.com>.

Competing Interests

Barney Harris received a grant that was used to part-fund the NEBARSS 2016 conference.

References

- Childe, V G** 1936 *Man Makes Himself*. New American Library.
- Renfrew, C** 1973 Monuments, mobilization and social organization in neolithic Wessex, In Renfrew, C (ed.) *The explanation of culture change: models in prehistory; proceedings of a meeting of the Research Seminar in Archaeology and Related Subjects held at the University of Sheffield*: 539–58. London: Duckworth.

How to cite this article: Harris, B, Davis, E R and Newson, V 2017 Review of the 3rd Annual Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Research Student Symposium. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 27(1): Art. 4, pp. 1–5, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/pia-520>

Published: 06 February 2017 **Accepted:** 06 February 2017 **Published:** 17 February 2017

Copyright: © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

 *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 