

Conference Reports
Struggles to Make Sense: Two Recent Gatherings on Arabia's Neolithic,
and the Question of Outdated Concepts of the Near and Middle Eastern Neolithic
Kuwait City, Dec. 2018, and Leiden, July 2019

Hans Georg K. Gebel

This contribution is less a report on the outcome of the Kuwait and Leiden gatherings (*cf.* the lists of contributions to both conferences documented below) than it is a reaction to a basic question of Neolithic research in Arabia's Early-Mid Holocene: What makes up the Neolithic in the present-day arid regions of the Arabian Peninsula? The new findings even trigger a more fundamental question: Is our understanding of the Middle Eastern Neolithic becoming antiquated, outdated, and inappropriate for future holistic Neolithic research?

The two gatherings referred to are the

- 3rd International Conference on the Archaeology of the Arabian Peninsula: *The Neolithic in Arabia*, organized by the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL) of Kuwait and by the French Center for Archaeology and Social Sciences (CE-FAS) at Kuwait, held in Kuwait City from 20th–22nd December 2018. Individuals organising the conference were Sultan al-Duwaish, Farah al-Sabah, and Rémy Crassard (Figs. 1-2);
- Special Session on *Stone Tools in Arabia* at the 53rd Seminar for Arabian Studies, held at Leiden University, July 14th, 2019. Individuals organising the session were Knut Bretzke, Yamandú H. Hilbert and Rémy Crassard (included contributions on Palaeolithic and post-Neolithic materials).

The Current Research Situation

It is quite difficult to summarise general outcomes of such gatherings, since the hitherto dispersed and fragmentary information and the weak chronologies from the distant and very diverse climate-sensitive natural regions represent a complexity that cannot be easily approached by comparative means. Main fields of obstacles and fallacies are the preservation and accessibility of sedimentary environments; the very restricted, isolated and quite fresh field research; and the persistent influence of preconceptions brought in by perspectives from the Fertile Crescent and the Neolithic Package model. We deal with surprise, confusion and perplexity in the face of steadily incoming new empirical data and the constant novelty of findings wherever we step out of the four-wheel truck, survey, and dig. The more data we collect, the less “clear” things get. But one thing became clear by this recent research in the Arabian lands: They are a challenge to the conventional concepts of the Neolithic and the Neolithisation in the Fertile Crescent, and that our “unidirectional” outpost explanations reflect only part of the stories.

I see a fundamental problem in the use of the term Neolithic for the Arabian lands if the reflection of “What is Neolithic in Arabia?” remains at current levels. Few contributions to either meeting discussed or justified their application of the term “Neolithic”, as if these problems had already been solved by the contributions to the special issue of *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 24 (Crassard and Drechsler eds. 2013).

Moreover, scholars inside and outside Arabia have very different understandings of the Neolithic: And the term itself may not be applicable any more in the light of recent findings from both the moderate regions of the Near East and present-day arid Arabia. I recall the Neolithic features in the southern Levant's Epipalaeolithic, the late hunter/ gatherer societies of the North Mesopotamian grasslands, or Arabia's Early-Mid Holocene productive management of wild food sources (*cf.* below). What has been helpful to characterise the Neolithic during the last decades, may have become inapplicable today: Is the term Neolithic already outdated? I would say yes for much of its current meaning and concepts, but I would like to stress that the term will remain useful when new and fundamental updates or redefinitions are received in order to manage the new evidence. The latter especially applies to the more holistic approaches that attempt to integrate the regional blends of Neolithic ingredients for general pictures. In a number of coming publications, I will promote a certain reconsideration (*cf.* next paragraphs), especially to integrate better the research on Neolithic features from outside the core areas and pre- and post-Neolithic periods (!), starting with Gebel (2019). I admit that the following is highly provoking to most of the colleagues working inside the moderate zones of Near East, while asking: How about testing perspectives on your Neolithic from outside and from its deeper foundations in time?

The Neolithic: To be Defined Exclusively as Productive Dispositions and Lifeways?¹

In short, I argue that our future understanding of the Neolithic should be restricted to only one, the most profound characteristic of the Neolithic, that of incipient human productive behaviour and resource management (as opposed to foraging behaviour and resource management). While this *per se* might be nothing new, it is new to define the Neolithic by exclusively these basic socioeconomic (and subsequent cognitive) dispositions and lifeways, and not simply as a period/ periods. In a way, this is also an ethological-ontological

definition of the Neolithic, referring to the new social phenotype, that of the productive human (“*Homo neolithicus*”). The argument may sound simple and populist, but its consequences would lead directly into the interpretative frameworks of Neolithic complexities and pathways, and the chances for their epistemic management.

After considering for years new and “unsuitable” evidence related to the Near Eastern Neolithic, I found that productive behaviour always remains as the common feature when comparing Neolithic and “para-Neolithic” societies. Neither sedentism nor storage, craft specialisation/ labour division, social differentiation, and other aspects appear to be primary characteristics of the early Neolithic; they are secondary expressions of productive behaviour. By using productive behaviour as the sole feature of Neolithic conditions, Neolithic complexities become better approachable and understandable. Neolithic processes outside the assigned periods’ millennia and regions become identifiable and holistically treatable; and they become freer of the doctrinal academic interpretation forcing to explain what cannot be explained anymore by the conventional understandings of the Neolithic.

Arabia’s Early Productive Lifeways²

More than other greater regions in the Middle East, the Arabian Peninsula offers environmentally isolated, different and specially equipped areas and refugia (*e.g.* hydrologically favoured localities, resource areas), always potentially connected by long-distance and/or transhumant networks exploiting rich marine and mineral resources, migrating ungulates, and (seasonal) grazing lands. Neolithic hot spots must have been connected by inland corridors and characterised by steppe economies such as (mobile) caprine pastoralism with niche agriculture, surplus hunting stations, and even permanent settlements. These economies most likely flourished by conservative socio-hydraulic competencies and aggregates adapting to climatic shifts in different ways than in the Fertile Crescent. And: Neolithic trajectories on the Arabian Peninsula were the result of an interplay between polylinear incursions and autochthonous adaptations.

Most interesting are productive lifeways that do not fit to the foraging - food producing dichotomy but appear to be characteristic of the Arabian Neolithic: the productive management of “wild” resources, such as migrating ungulates (*e.g.* the kite economies of the steppes: *e.g.* the works of Wael Abu-Azizeh in the southeastern Badia of Jordan); of (shell-)fish grounds (*e.g.* the Omani early Holocene coastal shell middens); or of runoff and aquifer waters (*e.g.* water harvesting systems at the potentially arable land: W. Abu-Azizeh and M. Tarawneh, S. Fujii, and L.G. Marcucci *et al.*). Obviously common examples of hunter-gatherers “familiar” with domestic animals (*e.g.* the works of M.P.

Maiorano *et al.* and J. Zarins) are also part of these ostensible dichotomies.

The L-FPPNB kite economies of Jabal Khashabiyeh east of al-Jafr (Abu Azizeh 2019) are a good example for a potential failure of conventional Neolithic binary thinking in the face of the new evidence from the “margins”: What if this industrial/ surplus hunting represents an autochthonous development of indigenous late hunter-gatherer societies in the steppes who were in an exchange arrangement with demands of settled areas, and not only shared – as attested – their chipped stone technologies with hunters and herders arriving in their steppes from the settled areas? What if these late hunter-gatherers quickly adopted risk-reducing pastoralism from the latter during the later LPPNB and FPPNB, a time when their hunting grounds became frequented by intruding herders in need of grazing land? Why should the industrial hunting of late hunter-gatherers not be seen as a truly productive Neolithic behaviour? Things may become even more interesting if these hypothetically autochthonous hunters were co-responsible for the collapse of the Transjordanian mega-sites, offering – together with the emerging mobile pastoralism in the steppes – alternative lifeways to the crowded mega-site aggregates.

Arabia’s Neolithic: Epistemic Needs of Future Research

It is suggested to structure arid Arabia’s future Neolithic research along guiding holistic ideas/ principles and epistemic procedures, using productive behaviour and lifeways as the sole characteristic of its Neolithic; implicit and explicit perspectives from the Fertile Crescent on Arabia’s Neolithic are to be controlled or excluded. Trajectories are seen as developing between the poles of polylinear incursions and autochthonous adaptations, influencing the socio-economic and cognitive behaviour of interacting mobile non-local and local late hunter-gatherers, long-distance pastoralists and other productive resident or otherwise philopatric groups.

Since fragmentary information must be processed to form a necessary holistic framework, formal epistemic procedures must guarantee the testability, traceability and management of the growing complexity of the results and that of revised hypotheses. Preferably, this is done by a system or set of constantly updated and tested hypotheses (*e.g.* as those suggested in Gebel 2019), constantly amended by new data and allowing testing of new information. There are not many other testable procedures in humanities to deal with fragmentary information serving a holistic approach from the beginning than this thesis approach (Gebel 2019 and references therein). In all this, research on Arabia’s Neolithic requires for its ill-preserved sedimentary environments the utmost scientific input as well as multi- or transdisciplinary research agendas, and especially archaeohydrological fieldwork.

As said before, these efforts need the merging as well as differentiation (!) of the perspectives on the Neolithic, jointly promoted by the hitherto segregated researchers working in Arabia and the moderate zones of the Middle East.

Hans Georg K. Gebel

Institute for Near Eastern Archaeology,
Freie Universität Berlin,
and ex oriente at Freie Universität Berlin
hggebel@zedat.fu-berlin.de

Endnotes

¹ Primary characteristics of Neolithic productive behaviour and lifeways are: sustainably available and sustainably used and managed biotic and abiotic resources; evidence for surplus production and a planning economy; confined reciprocity and commodification regimes; related processes of socio-economic growth including the development of social hierarchies based on rules not yet attested with foragers; progressive population dynamics; and sustainable wealth.

² Many of the general statements made here are explained in more detail in Gebel (2019), including by the references presented there.

References

Abu-Azizeh W.

2019 Mass-hunting strategies using “desert kites” in the south-eastern badia of Jordan: Alternative path of Neolithization in the Near Eastern arid margins? Lecture at the workshop “*Landscape Studies in the Near East: the Next 100 Years*”. Chicago: Oriental Institute of Chicago University, May 2019.

Crassard R. and Drechsler P. (eds.)

2013 Neolithic studies on the Arabian Peninsula. *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 24.

Gebel H.G.K.

2019 Polylinear incursions and autochthonous adaptations: Neolithisation and sustainable sedentarisation of the Arabian Peninsula. *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 2019:1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aae.12146>

Programme of the 3rd International Conference on the Archaeology of the Arabian Peninsula: *The Neolithic in Arabia*, Held at the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, Kuwait City, 20th - 22nd Dec., 2018

SESSION 1. Origins and dispersals of the Arabian Neolithic

Yamandú H. HILBERT (CNRS, France): Stone tool use in Arabia during the Terminal Pleistocene and Early Holocene human occupation: trends and their impact on human demography



Fig. 1 Group photo of the conference participants and organisers at the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL) of Kuwait, Kuwait City, at the opening on November 20th, 2018. (Photo: staff member)

Rémy CRASSARD (CNRS/CEFAS, France/Kuwait): A Neolithic influence from the Fertile Crescent? ‘Naviform’ technology from Saudi Arabia

Cheryl MAKAREWICZ (University of Kiel, Germany): The emergence of pastoralism in the Arabian Peninsula: Zooarchaeological and isotopic perspectives from the Jordanian highlands and steppe ‘periphery’

Hans Georg K. GEBEL (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany): Sustainable sedentarisation and the establishment of food production on the Arabian Peninsula

SESSION 2. Latest results from United Arab Emirates and Qatar

Mark BEECH (Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism, UAE): New results from excavations at MR11 Marawah Island, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Kevin LIDOUR (Paris University Panthéon-Sorbonne, France): Analysis of the fish remains from the Neolithic stone house of Marawah Island (MR11), United Arab Emirates

Sophie MÉRY (CNRS, France): UAQ36, a fifth millennium BC site in Umm al Quwain

Richard CUTTLER (Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism, UAE): Neolithic occupation at Wadi Debay’an, North West Qatar

SESSION 3. Latest results from Saudi Arabia

Abdullah ALSHAREKH (King Saud University, Saudi Arabia): Scientific and stylistic approaches to dating the earliest rock art in Arabia: An evaluation

Niklas HAUSMANN (Foundation of Research and Technology, Greece): Marine food sources from the Farasan Islands and their relation to the Arabian mainland and the southern Red Sea

SESSION 4. Latest results from Oman

Jean-François BERGER (CNRS, France): First contribution of the excavation and the chronostratigraphic study of Ruways1 Neolithic shell middens (Oman), in terms of Neolithization, palaeoeconomy, social-environmental interactions and site formation processes

Anaïs MARRAST (National Museum of Natural History, France): Ancient exploitation of coastal resources during the Arabian Neolithic: the settlements of Ra’s al Hamra 6 and 5 (Sultanate of Oman)

Olivia MUNOZ (CNRS, France): Neolithic coastal populations from South-Eastern Arabia: the contribution of funerary and bioanthropological data

Ash PARTON (University of Oxford, UK): Holocene drainage and wetland development in the Batinah Region of Northern Oman

Marcin BIAŁOWARCZUK (University of Warsaw, Poland): New prehistoric sites in the Qumayrah Valley, Oman. Preliminary results of two seasons of investigations

Maria Pia MAIORANO (Naples University, Italy): Projectile points of Southeastern Arabia: quantitative approach to regional issues

SESSION 5. Neolithic in Kuwait

Piotr BIELINSKI (University of Warsaw, Poland): Bahra 1 - an Ubaid culture related settlement in Northern Kuwait and its possible functions

Agnieszka PIENKOWSKA (University of Warsaw, Poland): The earliest settlement remains at the Bahra 1 site.

Robert CARTER (University College London, UK): The Arabian Neolithic in Ubaid Mesopotamia? Cross-cultural interactions in Northern Kuwait and Southern Iraq during the 6th and 5th millennia BC

SESSION 6. Ubaid Ceramic from the Gulf

Hasan ASHKANANI (Kuwait University, Kuwait): A characterization study of Late Neolithic ceramics from As-Sabbiya, Kuwait, using non-destructive pXRF

Eleanor PRESTON (University College London, Qatar): The Ubaid in the Arabian Gulf: Petrographic and compositional analysis of ceramic material



Fig. 2 Session 1 participants (Y.H. Hilbert, C. Makarewicz, R. Crassard and H.G.K. Gebel) with their chairman R. Carter (at the lectern). (photo: staff member)

Anna SMOGORZEWSKA (University of Warsaw, Poland): Pottery traditions in the Neolithic Gulf. New evidence from Bahra 1, Kuwait

FINAL SESSION. Questions and discussions. Concluding remarks, publication

EXCURSION. Site visit to Bahra 1 on 22nd, November 2017 (organized in cooperation with the Kuwaiti-Polish team)

CHAIRMEN: Abdulhadijal-Ajmi, Piotr Bielinski, Robert Carter, Moawiyah Ibrahim, Sayid Mahfoudh, Fahad al Wohaibi

Programme of the *Stone Tools in Arabia Special Session* Hold at the 53rd Seminar for Arabian Studies, Leiden University, July 14th, 2019*

*includes here the contributions on Palaeolithic and Post-Neolithic materials

Stéphanie BONILAURI and Amir BESHKANI: The variability within bifacial technologies found in Adam Region, Oman

Vitaly USIK and Yamandú H. HILBERT: What makes a Levallois core Nubian, type-list or classification?

Rémy CRASSARD and Yamandú H. HILBERT: The Middle Paleolithic of central and northern Saudi Arabia and their implications on demographic dispersals

Beshkani AMIR: The extent of the normalization of Nubian cores and the use life of Nubian debitage

Knut BRETZKE: On the diversity of the Paleolithic record in Sharjah, UAE

Anthony SINCLAIR: Palaeolithic or Stone Age: exploring a language for the archaeological record of the first hominins in Arabia

Yamandú H. HILBERT: Technological and typological variability of Upper and Late Palaeolithic stone tool assemblages from South Arabia

Inna MATEICIUCOVÁ *et al.*: A new lithic site at the sediment-filled depression Ḥayl Al-Āja on the eastern side of Jebel Kawr, North Oman

Heiko KALLWEIT and Mark BEECH: Lithics from Dalma Island excavations - remarks on the lithic collections from Dalma Island excavations 1992-2014

Denis ŠTEFANISKO: Behind the Border: The chipped industry of 'Ainab 1A. Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (8500 -8100 cal. B.C.) site at Jabal 'Ainab (South-east Badia, Jordan)

Anne JÖRGENSEN-LINDAHL: Micro-wear analysis on Epipalaeolithic and PPN chipped stone assemblages from southwest Asia – past and present

Maria MAIORANO *et al.*: Living and moving around the area of Maitan: Neolithic workshops and regional exchanges in Southern Rub al Khali (Sultanate of Oman)

Hans Georg K. GEBEL: The Hamrian Punch. Cone shell meat extraction in coastal Oman's later prehistory. A Replicative system analysis

Norbert BUCHINGER *et al.*: Early Bronze Age knapped lithics from Hili 8 – a first technological assessment

Ullrich OCHS: A Hafit Period stone tool assemblage from al-Khashbah, Sultanate of Oman

Mark W. MOORE *et al.*: Bronze Age microlith technology at Saruq-al Hadid, Dubai

Silvia LISCHI and Yamandú H. HILBERT: Preliminary investigation of the lithic industry from the Iron Age coastal settlement at Inqitat (HAS1), southern Oman

Discussions / Conclusions / Publication planning