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14
Narratives for the European Neolithic

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Abstract

I look again at a long-running tension in archaeology between generalisation and particularisation. I examine several cases of what I call general theory in the recent literature, variously covering issues of agency, ontology, diversity, time and chronology, and social relations, and contrast their often universalising tone with more particularising approaches including aDNA analyses and high-resolution chronologies, which can help in the construction of detailed narratives for the specific historical developments of the European Neolithic. That appeals to more focused, 'middle-range' theories. I use this critique and discussion to contextualise the past and continuing contributions of Volker Heyd to the study of the European Neolithic

Keywords: Theory, generalisation, particularisation, Europe, Neolithic, detailed narratives

14.1 Introduction

Archaeologists can often be separated by their preference for either generalisation or particularisation. Such a distinction goes at least as far back as David

Clarke ('the explicit realization that there is or could be a comprehensive archaeological general theory'; Clarke 1973: 16) and Christopher Hawkes ('I tend to prefer specific themes to general philosophical ones'; Hawkes 1973: 178) in the early 1970s, as explicit theorising in the discipline became more significant with the advent of 'new' or processual approaches. Cutting a long story short, that distinction seems to me in many ways to continue today. Elsewhere I have characterised a lot of recent and current interpretation as based fundamentally on generalised models, concepts and approaches, often imported from other disciplines (Whittle 2018: Chapters 1–2; cf. Ingold 2018: 112 for a parallel definition of the generalising role of anthropology; for a helpful, critical survey of archaeological theory, see Chapman 2023), that can be contrasted with the emergent possibilities for a more particularising effort at interpretation more akin to history than anthropology (Whittle 2018: 8). These different emphases raise yet again the place and nature of theory in the discipline. If we say that theory creates the conscious or unconscious frame within which interpretation takes place, should general theory have a dominant role, with the risk of encouraging generalising interpretations which are likely to collide with the facts of diverse settings and contexts? Or should we instead concentrate on specific contexts and sequences? But if the latter, what kind of interpretive points of reference should condition and guide our narratives?

I want therefore briefly to discuss a short, selected series of recent – and varied – generalising texts by prominent archaeological thinkers, covering important questions of agency, ontology, diversity, time and chronology, and social relations, and to contrast those with other, more particularising approaches including aDNA analyses and high-resolution chronologies, which have assumed more importance in recent years, but which I believe the discipline has yet fully to absorb. That may reveal something of the current nature of theory in archaeology. My critique is not anti-theory (see the debate in Bintliff & Pearce 2011) but is designed to question again the usefulness of differing kinds of theory. And my ultimate aim here is to use this debate to help to characterise the very substantial contributions to Neolithic studies over the years, and still continuing, by Volker Heyd.

14.2 General theory: some recent examples

In *Assembling Past Worlds*, focused on Neolithic Britain, Oliver Harris (2021) advances the general proposition that human agency has to be seen alongside material agencies, in a 'flat ontology' which does not automatically give priority to the actions and intentions of people. This is part of the currently fashionable, post-humanist 'ontological turn' and series of new materialisms (for longer and more detailed accounts and discussions, see Harris & Cipolla 2017; Crellin et al. 2021; Chapman 2023). There is hardly space here to do proper justice to the diversity of views and sources which this approach – or perhaps better, set of approaches – embraces, but I think it is important to note the uneasy mix of analogies based on indigenous perspectives and general models introduced from all manner of studies in other disciplines, including prominently the work of Deleuze. There are strong reductive and universalising tendencies. Indigenous perspectives tend to be treated as a unified and timeless whole (note Spriggs 2008), as if every relevant society were both animistic in its beliefs and in the same way. Setting out these theoretical positions as a precursor to the examination of Neolithic Britain takes some 68 pages in a book 276 pages long (Harris 2021). These could be seen as a contemporary version of what David Clarke had in mind 50 years ago for 'a comprehensive archaeological general theory'. They certainly lead to challenging if at times rather mystical questions, including what Neolithic materials were capable of becoming, what a dead Neolithic body could do, and what worlds Neolithic architecture created (Harris 2021: Chapters 4–6). There is certainly plenty of fresh thinking, with much emphasis on flow, vibrancy, complexity and contingency, with the novel perspectives for the Early Neolithic for example that Neolithic matter moved places and people, attracting them to flint sources and mountains, and that Neolithic matter remembered (Harris 2021: 199). Such new concepts and vocabulary can be insightful, but they also serve to exclude a lot of other factors from debate. There is no extended discussion of the wider context of Early Neolithic colonisation or migration into Britain (and Ireland), now strongly reinforced by recent and ongoing aDNA analyses

(see papers by Brace & Booth and by Cassidy in Whittle et al. 2023, and references), or of regional variation in the early centuries, as revealed by the steadily improving and higher-resolution chronologies made possible by the Bayesian modelling of radiocarbon dates (Whittle et al. 2011; 2022; Griffiths 2021). The overall upshot is a series of case studies across a wide range of contexts, individually often insightfully worked, but serving as static snapshots rather than as a sustained narrative (see below) for a complicated and dynamic process of change; the concluding, synthesising 'ontography', covering successive blocks of time each a few centuries long, suffers from the same charge (Harris 2021: 201–206). Pessimistically, it is as though the answers, or at least responses, to all manner of complex questions have been determined by the opening theorising, generalising if not universalising in nature.

In *Archaeology and its Discontents*, John Barrett also sets out a general proposition, that 'archaeology must enable us to understand how different forms of life have emerged historically through their desire to understand, and to engage with, the worlds that they have encountered' (Barrett 2021: 1); further, he argues that 'the fundamental issue that archaeology confronts concerns the relationship between the various material conditions that once existed and the ways that the various forms of humanness emerged by their learning how to live within those material conditions' (Barrett 2021: 1). Here then is what could be seen as a general theory of diversity, arguably another kind of candidate for Clarke's vision of archaeological general theory. This is certainly very different to that offered by Harris, and indeed Barrett (2021: 3, 140) explicitly confines a meaningful sense of agency to living beings. There is also explicit reference to the parallel need for toleration of diversity in the modern world (Barrett 2021: 7), and the welcome conclusion, general and somewhat legalistic as it is, is that 'archaeology matters because its investigations should remind us of the ways that all of us live depending upon the ways that we can gain an understanding of, and engagement with, our worlds' (Barrett 2021: 140). This chimes with the approach of Tim Ingold to anthropology noted above. What is of interest here, however, is how the argument is constructed, and then applied. The central approach relies on two dimen-

sions: on the one hand a critique of the concept of an archaeological record which represents past action, which I think many people will find difficult, and on the other hand a principally historiographic account of developments in archaeological theory since the 1950s, leading to the argument that 'the basis for understanding human diversity lies in the biology of life…treating the histories of human diversity as if they were the products of biological growth, development, and adaptation' (Barrett 2021: 5 and Chapter 6). The argument throughout remains at a very high level of generalisation, not to say universalising. Other possibilities in terms of human agency, choice, creativity and free will, to say nothing of myriad forms of values, beliefs and social relationships, are barely considered; there is no danger here of individual ethnographies setting the tone, as warned against by Ingold. And when it finally comes to a case study, of the context of the Early Neolithic LBK in central Europe, the account is disappointingly brief, thinly worked and second-hand (Barrett 2021: 129–138). Are existing, detailed accounts of the diversity of LBK lifeways (e.g. Bickle & Whittle 2013, and references) so lightly to be set aside, mere archaeological equivalents of ethnographies?

Next, I want to discuss an important series of writings on time and chronology by Gavin Lucas and Laurent Olivier (Olivier 2019; Lucas 2021; Lucas & Olivier 2022). These set out a number of general propositions about temporality; again there is little space to do these full justice, nor the differences between the authors (though these can be followed in the intriguing dialogues in Lucas & Olivier 2022). Lucas (2005; 2019; see also Lucas 2021: 112–116) has previously championed the importance of Paul Ricoeur (1984) for the understanding of the character and possibilities of narrative. I have fully supported this (Whittle 2018: 40–44, 49–51), though it is worth reflecting whether Ricoeur's ideas are not just another instance of grand, high-level generalisation. The recent central proposition of Lucas is that time is complex and multi-dimensional; history is not just chronology (Lucas 2021:19; 'in itself it does not give us history but merely its empty shell'), time is not singular and individual (Lucas 2021: 37, with reference to debates between Bergson and Einstein), and differing scales should be seen as relative (Lucas

2021: 53, 56–58, with the well-known tripartite scheme of Braudel rebranded as severance, recurrence and persistence). This kind of approach is reinforced in the joint discussions in Lucas and Olivier (2022). An ambivalent attitude to high-resolution Bayesian chronologies is expressed, partly admiring, but largely inclining to dismissal as mere technicality (Lucas & Olivier 2022: 105, 107). Thus, 'while I think these Bayesian methods are marvellous and will enable us to produce far more sophisticated narratives, they don't really change anything when it comes to our understanding of time' (Lucas & Olivier 2022: 104); and 'both deep history and Bayesian dating are just part of the same phenomenon…Neither dislodges chronology from its hegemonic position within archaeology…both seem exceptionally conventional' (Lucas & Olivier 2022: 105).

A table sets out alleged differences between 'old style stories', featuring looking for points of origin, identifying events, focusing attention on actions and considering materiality as passive, and 'new style stories', which seek processes of emergence, identify trajectories, focus on interactions, consider materiality as active and think of the present as containing the past (Lucas & Olivier 2022: 62, Table 3.2). I think this is a very simplistic set of distinctions, and I would argue that high-resolution Bayesian chronologies have themselves revealed many instances in Neolithic studies of reference to multiple times, supported by an ability to define the specific contexts to which given phenomena belong and from which they may derive. This table in fact comes originally from a slightly earlier paper by Laurent Olivier (2019; cf. Olivier 2015), which in the context of understandable concern about the devastations and threats of the Anthropocene claims archaeology as the study of things, to be sharply distinguished from history and anthropology respectively (Olivier 2019: 18), and as an activity principally concerned with the present (Olivier 2019: 19). I think that this attempt to police the disciplinary boundaries is unhelpful. The focus on 'presentism' is also puzzling. It is surely a truism that archaeological evidence only survives in the present; when it does not, our access to the past is lost. But the account seems to come close to denying the existence of the past, and our ability to gather evidence from and about the

past, not only in the form of remains, but also now by aDNA analysis and scientific dating methods.

A last comment is that these works provide little by way of sustained case studies. There is an interesting exploration of the life and times of a Roman jar (Lucas 2005: Chapter 4), and Olivier has explored to good effect the varying temporal references in the goods and structure of the well-known Hochdorf princely burial (Lucas & Olivier 2022: 21, and references). There is, however, no detailed discussion of specific further contexts or extended sequences, which could be the substance of constructed, interpretive narratives, the stuff of history.

My final, brief example brings us to *The Dawn of Everything* by David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021), which has attracted a lot of attention for its radical views on the development of social relations and formations. Again, it is hardly necessary to make the disclaimer that it is difficult to do justice to all its sophisticated and complex arguments in the space available here. Nor is the book short of specific case studies, in contrast to what I have just written above, though just like the treatment of the same global field of the nature of social change through time, but from an implicitly evolutionary perspective, by Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus (2012), for the most part its treatment of Europe apart from the Palaeolithic period and a longer treatment of Trypillia 'megasites' is fairly cursory and there is little reference to the vast archaeological literature on Neolithic and Copper Age social relations there. Nonetheless, the central proposition that we should not take for granted or as fact the accepted social evolutionary approaches promulgated since the Enlightenment deserves to be taken just as seriously for the European sequence as for elsewhere around the world. This seems to me another example of grand or general theory, though different from the others considered so far in having a rather negative or spoiling aim. In many ways, I am sympathetic to this attempted subversion of standard thinking, having tried in some of my past writing to challenge simplistic notions of for example chiefdom society (see references in Whittle 2018: Chapter 5). But in terms of longer-running narratives, it is one thing to point out the excessive generalisations required by early

versions of the chiefdom model (whose diversity in practice many anthropologists have long since pointed out), and quite another to abandon any sense of the possible overall trajectory (compare Lucas & Olivier 2022: 65) of social change through time in the European Neolithic and Copper Age sequence. Attention to the details of sequence and context is fundamental. I think it is in this field especially that notions of multiplicity and non-linearity may apply (note again Gavin Lucas 2021: 58, discussed above, proposing 'breaks, cycles, persistence'). In my own most recent treatment of these issues (Whittle 2018: Chapter 5), I argued for the usually *short-term* emergence of concentrations of social power in the European Neolithic, in varying manifestations, with a concomitant failure by would-be aggrandisers (in Brian Hayden's term: references in Whittle 2018: 186; cf. Dani et al. 2022) to consolidate their temporarily achieved positions; by contrast, and in agreement with what Graeber and Wengrow went on to assert, we should not underestimate the strength and effectiveness of values and beliefs shared across the community. Looking ahead to the work of Volker Heyd (see below), it is instructive in this regard to note the recent suggestion from Martin Furholt (2021) that it was precisely the emergence of centralised and often aggressive and violent urban societies in the Near East from the fourth millennium onwards which had far-reaching effects on the communities of the surrounding steppe and ultimately Europe. This Sherrattian insight is important (even though in turn it is based on generalising notions of 'translocality' and ultimately rooted in a modern ethnographic study of labour movement in southern Africa).

14.3 Other archaeologies and approaches: towards narratives for the European Neolithic

I have concentrated so far on varying forms of general or generalising theory. I am *not* arguing for any kind of abandonment of theory but my overall critique

is that what I have called general theory is often so high-level and universalising as to be of little specific use in the kind of more particularising, historical approach which I believe archaeology, including prehistory, could and should now adopt. Two developments seem to me central for this shift. One is the emergence, especially over the last few years, of effective and extensive aDNA analyses (Kristiansen 2022; Whittle et al. 2023, with many key references to the prolific primary literature), operating now not only at a population level but also helping to trace relationships and descent in individual contexts, such as at the Hazleton North long cairn in the first half of the 37th century cal BC (Fowler et al. 2022), or in the Globular Amphora mass grave at Koszyce in southeast Poland in the 29th or 28th centuries cal BC (Schroeder et al. 2019). Ancient DNA analyses can be complemented now by a host of other scientific analyses. The other major development over the last thirty years has been the Bayesian modelling of radiocarbon dates (see primary references in Whittle et al. 2011; Whittle 2018). That has enabled modelling of contexts and sequences to the scale of individual lifetimes, generations and even on occasion decades: the stuff of current and future narratives at a level of detail and precision unthinkable until recently, except in regions blessed with abundant preservation of wood for dendrochronology, such as the Alpine foreland (Whittle 2018: Chapter 3). Further applications can be predicted, now that lipid dating of pottery has been shown to be possible and accurate (Casanova et al. 2020), and the ongoing and future refinement of single-year tree-ring calibration data (Reimer et al. 2020) promises to add significant further precision to date estimates at some point down the line.

There is simply not space here to expand these points, but the upshot seems to me that it is increasingly possible to construct detailed narratives of human action across contexts and through sequences, routinely to the scales of centuries and half-centuries, individual lifetimes, generations and even on occasion decades, for the European Neolithic and Copper Age, and this is the basis for a much more historical, much more specific and more particularising, and much less generalising approach than that found in a lot of prehistory since the processual era. This is *not* a theory-free exercise. Ancient DNA

results need careful interpretation, as many critics have pointed out, not least to avoid coarse, clumsy or simplistic characterisations of material patterning in uncritical use of the culture concept (Hofmann 2015; Furholt 2021, and references), and the Bayesian process is explicitly bound up with interpretive choices and the possibility of iteration (Bayliss 2009; Bayliss et al. 2016). But increasingly what may serve us best is any number of what we could relabel as 'middle range' theories (see Chapman 2023: 14), setting a tighter frame for interpretation and providing a vocabulary, and addressing any number of specific topics, including (but this is just by way of example) mobility, pioneering settlement, sociality including kinship (Fowler 2022 is a very good example of what I have in mind; note also Brück 2021) and household relationships, gender, labour, collective decision-making – and so on, in a much longer list than I have space for here. This claim echoes several of the papers in Bintliff and Pearce (2011).

14.4 The contribution of Volker Heyd

The work of Volker Heyd on the fourth and third millennia over the years seems to me to exemplify many of the approaches advocated here. He has concerned himself with both the detail of particular contexts (e.g. Heyd 2007) and much wider perspectives (e.g. Heyd 2017). He has not dodged major interpretive issues, such as culture, social relations and mobility, but seems to me to come at them in a very grounded and context-specific manner, rather than seeking to prove predetermined hypotheses fashioned in general theory. His current investigations of the Yamnaya phenomenon and its relations with Corded Ware culture continue these virtues. The relevant aDNA data are centrally involved but treated critically, specific geographies are respected, and there is a strong effort to provide a robust and particular chronological sequence, rather than any reliance on vague notions of emergence or trajectories as discussed above (Heyd 2021). To avoid it looking like I am proposing

sainthood, I should add that I think the whole chronological framework for the Yamnaya-Corded Ware phenomenon is still in need of radical refinement and better modelling (cf. Whittle 2018: 219). But the 'Yamnaya Impact' project seems a major step in the right direction. Long may Volker's investigations continue.

Acknowledgements

Warm thanks are due to Antti Lahelma for the invitation to contribute to this volume. I am grateful to Bianca Preda-Bălănică, Bob Chapman and Dani Hofmann for critical readings of earlier drafts of this chapter, and for references, as well as to an anonymous referee.

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