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Editorial

Open Access

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At Home in the Neolithic: Understanding Diversity in Neolithic Houses and Households

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Abstract: In the Editorial for the special edition on Neolithic Households, we introduce the history of house and household studies in European Neolithic Archaeology and outline the papers in this collection.

Keywords: Neolithic Europe, houses, households, material culture, diversity in the past

This special edition of *Open Archaeology* began life as two sessions held at the 2014 and 2015 European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) annual conferences, in Istanbul and Glasgow respectively, focused on Neolithic houses. The aim of both sessions was to chart the variability found in the evidence from houses during the Neolithic, and to explore how archaeologists might begin to unpick what this diversity reveals about social organisation and the daily practices of Neolithic communities. Across the papers presented in the sessions, many of which are published here, a number of key concepts and debates were repeatedly raised, some specific to Neolithic studies, others with implications for the discipline more widely. Here we explore these debates and present the wider research context to the studies presented in the special edition.

1 House Studies in the Neolithic

Archaeological investigations of European Neolithic houses did not get off to the best of starts. While excavations by Tsountas (1908) at the sites of Sesklo and Dimini in Thessaly, Greece, established early on that the Neolithic period in Greece was characterised by rich architectural remains mainly in the form of free-standing rectangular mud-brick houses, the identification of house structures in the North of Europe was a much slower process. In the case of the *Linearbandkeramik* (LBK), the first post-built longhouses to be excavated were considered to have been grain stores, while their inhabitants were thought to have dwelt in pit houses alongside them (Buttler and Haberey 1936). On Orkney, Childe (1931) interpreted the impressive stone architecture of Skara Brae as belonging to the Pictish era. Despite such inauspicious beginnings and being highly varied in number, dimensions, plan, duration, materials and decorative elaboration, the house is by now a very familiar concept in European Neolithic studies and has been subjected to an extensive literature (e.g. Hodder 1990, Tomkins 2004, Halstead 2006, Nanoglou 2008, Souvatzi 2008, Hofmann and Smyth 2013). This has resulted in a wide-variety of approaches to Neolithic houses. Up to the early 1990s, when the concepts of ‘house’ and ‘household’ began to be subjected to greater theoretical interrogation by archaeologists (Draşovean et al. in prep), the house was frequently overshadowed in Neolithic Europe

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y settlement studies. The ‘house’ was hence not a focus of research of itself, rather it was almost taken for granted as a self-evident social unit (Souvatzi 2008), but important research was carried out at this time. Tells in south-eastern Europe were primarily composed of mud-brick architecture, but despite the presence of well-preserved architectural remains, these did not hold a central place in the archaeological discourse at the time with the emphasis mainly placed on determining typological sequences for dating purposes (Chapman 1981). Modderman’s (1970) typology of LBK longhouse plans, although not providing the chronological information he was hoping for, was important ground work in describing both the uniformity and diversity in LBK architecture.

Beyond the European Neolithic, it was during the 1970s and 1980s that ‘Household Archaeology’ was born within the context of Mesoamerican studies (Souvatzi 2008, 23). In 1982, Wilk and Rathje’s influential edited volume called for the household to become an important “mid-level” analytical unit, recognising that the house brought together both social and economic processes. Modifications in houses, their shape, function and material production, were now investigated to inform the archaeologist of broader cultural and historical changes, providing a bridge between material culture and economic data on the one hand and ‘big questions’ of history on the other (Wilk and Rathje 1982). Much of this analysis was, of course, carried out under the framework of Processualism, with a strong economic focus. Rather than being topics of interest in their own right, houses and households were thus used as a framework for answering broader questions, such as determining social organisation and rank, processes of socio-evolution and modelling systems of production. Research into Neolithic houses was influenced by this broader discussion, with activity areas and socio-economic organisation becoming areas of research interest (e.g. Boelicke 1982, Byrd and Banning 1988). This work has since been criticised for smoothing over the variability of the evidence and missing the symbolic potential of the house in the Neolithic (e.g. Hodder 1990, Souvatzi 2008), but its key insights, that the house was a place where different scales of analysis meet and an important *locus* of social transformation, should not be overlooked.

Since the 1990s, a rich and diverse literature developed on Neolithic houses, influenced by anthropology and a myriad of Post-Processual approaches, but also developing from fundamental research questions about the origin and spread of the Neolithic (e.g. Hodder 1990; Bánffy 2013). The ‘house’ as an essentialised concept was critiqued, with its variability across the European Neolithic repeatedly stressed (e.g. most recently, papers in Hofmann and Smyth 2013). Major themes developed to interpret Neolithic houses, over the last 25 years or so, have been usefully summarised by Borić (2008, 113). First, houses can articulate worldviews or cultural affiliations, often expressed through origin myths or by viewing the house as an *axis mundi* (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Waterson 1995; Coudart 1998). Second, they structure and organise communities, providing a framework through which people situate themselves both within and between households and house groups (i.e. provide an understanding of the body, self and identity; Bourdieu 1973; Parker Pearson and Richards 1994; Jones 2005). Third, the house ensures the perpetuation of the institution itself by operating as a collective agency and creating lineages, and it is therefore an important focal point for social memory and transmission (Lévi-Strauss 1982; Hodder 1990; Kent 1990; Joyce and Gillespie 2000; Gillespie 2007; Borić 2007). These three themes (cosmology, identity and memory) have been drawn on to inspire research into Neolithic houses in different ways. For example, Hodder (1990) saw the house as born out of a worldview, framed around a tension between the *Domus* (domestic) and *Agrios* (wild), which it helped to spread with farming across Europe. Whittle (1996, 2003) suggested that the Neolithic house could well have provided a forum in which differing identities could come together, blending hunter-gather, indigenous ways of life with farming. Bradley (2001), arguing that myth and memory were bound up in house architecture, proposed the orientation of LBK longhouses symbolised the migration routes from the southeast, perhaps the ‘mythical homeland’ for the culture. Kotsakis (1999) interpreted the successive vertical rebuilding of Neolithic houses in tell sites in Greece as an ideological mechanism that sought to legitimise genealogical continuities.

Undoubtedly, one particular house model borrowed from anthropology has had a huge impact on Neolithic archaeology, that of *société à maison* (house societies) developed by Lévi-Strauss (1982). The concept of ‘house societies’ has found wide-spread application across Europe, from the south-east (Borić 2007) to north-west (Richards and Jones 2016). There is not space here to rehearse all the details of the

house society concept (and this has been done at length several times before, e.g. Carston & Hugh-Jones 1995; Beck 2007, Borić 2008). The model proposed by Lévi-Strauss (1982) arose from his attempts to resolve descent patterns that did not appear to be defined by gender or blood-lines; where inheritance and descent could be traced through either or both of the parents, or where it appeared to switch between the two over time. At the time, that the house could have operated as a ‘moral person’ or a ‘corporate group’, worthy of the kind of debate kinship had been subjected to in anthropology, was a radical suggestion. For Lévi-Strauss (1982), house societies were a stage of social development, marking societies that were transitioning from kin- to class-based, creating hierarchies and jostling for economic and social power and prestige. This model has drawn archaeology to themes of kinship and descent, the central place houses can take in myth and origin narratives and the significance of material inheritance, though the social evolutionary aspects of Lévi-Strauss’ model are now often rejected.

The ‘house society’ model has re-energised studies of Neolithic houses over recent years, coinciding with a wealth of new techniques and evidence coming to light. Isotopic analysis of human and animal skeletal material alongside the huge developments in the information available from aDNA, have provided insights into kinship and descent patterns, as well as household diets and mobility patterns (e.g. Whittle and Bickle 2013; Brandt *et al.* 2013; Pearson *et al.* 2015). Detailed artefactual studies, drawing on developments in scientific techniques, in provenancing raw materials, analysing lipid residues in pottery and microwear and residues traces on stone tools, have allowed variability in household activities and skills to be investigated (e.g. van Gijn and Mazzucco 2013; Tsoraki *et al.* in prep.). The economic prosperity of the wider European area during the 1990s and early 2000s led to an increased number of excavations, which in turn has added to the number of houses we know for the Neolithic—and the identification of houses in regions, where previously they had been thought to be limited in number or even non-existent—and also to the material culture and funerary evidence found alongside houses (e.g. Pappa and Besios 1999; Smyth 2014). An example is the multi-phase site of Alsónyék-Bátaszék, from the Tolna Sárköz region (right bank of the Danube in southern Hungary), where excavations in advance of motorway excavations revealed some 118 post-built longhouses (Osztás *et al.* 2012). At the same time, research-led excavations at Durrington Walls in southern Britain revealed the remains of a Neolithic village, which is thought to have housed the builders of Stonehenge, which lies 3km to the southwest (Parker Pearson 2012). The houses were preserved by deposits of colluvium and survived with all of their occupation surfaces, including house floor deposits and middens, intact (Chan 2009). The level of preservation has provided a rare opportunity to examine the full range of material practices associated with a southern British Neolithic settlement and has shown the potential for preservation in areas where intensive agriculture was thought to have eradicated all structural remains of settlement. This rich material record is posing its own challenges, both practical (some techniques are expensive and see only limited application) and intellectual. It was this new evidence, and the ideas developing from the ‘house societies’ model that encouraged us to put together this special edition, to track how we can draw together the diversity of different forms of evidence to ask challenging and productive questions about Neolithic houses and the people which lived in and through them. This special edition thus provides a timely chance to review how these different datasets intersect and look to future directions for research.

2 Outline to the Special Edition

This special edition focuses on Neolithic houses from southern and central Europe, which covers a diversity of architectural forms, building materials and settlement patterns. The papers range geographically from northern Greece to central Germany, and from the earliest Neolithic in some regions, to the transition to the Copper Age/Chalcolithic in others. However, the seven papers in this volume are unified by a focus on the intersection between Neolithic houses, their material remains and their inhabitants. Certain themes repeatedly cross-cut all of the papers. Here we note three significant issues that the papers raise that suggest the direction for future research. The first major theme is the temporality of the house, not just in terms of its duration but also in terms of how attitudes to the house and household may have changed

over time (Vondrovský et al., Bierman). The second, how the household was organised and integrated into the wider social group (Lymperaki et al., Faragó, Pavlů et al.). The third, how houses were used to express, perhaps even enforce, certain forms of social identity (Połczyński and Michalak, Czerniak and Pyzel). For the purposes of this introduction, the papers are introduced geographically from southeast to northwest.

Lymperaki et al. focus on the analysis of a single artefact category—pottery vessels—from the Late Neolithic site of Stavroupoli-Thessaloniki, Greece, in order to investigate the relationship between households and the wider community. The shape and size of the vessels provide insights into everyday cooking practices. Habitual action associated with cooking, eating and other activities carried out around the hearth, can be prominent sites at which social rules are passed on and regulated (Kalogiropoulou 2013), as well as social ties such as kinship formed and negotiated (Carsten 2004). The authors conclude that, although the basic domestic group was of a limited ‘family’ size, some cooking facilities such as ovens were shared among multiple households. This paper stresses the importance of not researching the house in isolation from the practices with which it was associated.

Focusing on the post-LBK world in northeast Hungary, Faragó conducted a statistical and spatial analysis of the distribution of different raw materials of the chipped stone tools from the site of Polgár-Csőszhalom (Tisza-Herpláy culture, classed as the Late Neolithic in this region). The results show that whilst the stone working activities took place across the settlement, they did not seem to be focused within individual houses. Rather, the working of chipped stone took place within clusters of cooperating houses or house groups. The analysis aptly shows that the household should not necessarily be assumed to be the basic unit of analysis within settlement archaeology and that social identity was formed at a variety of different scales.

We move further northeast for the next two papers and into Bohemia, Czech Republic. Pavlů et al. ask whether there is a correlation between the ground plans of LBK longhouses and their associated economic activities. The focal point for this analysis is the famous site of Bylany. Although this site was excavated in the later 1960s and 1970s, it is currently the focus of new archaeometric analysis. They follow Lévi Strauss’s (2007) model of the house as a centre of identity creation, through learnt dispositions and attitudes being passed on between inhabitants. Comparable to Lymperaki et al., they suggest different food or cooking practices were central to Neolithic life around houses. The paper demonstrates through a range of different evidence, such as pot form and analysis of the fats preserved in the clay fabric, that house form was associated with different economic practices, suggesting a series of different social identities were co-located at LBK settlements.

Vondrovský et al. analyse the transition from the LBK to the post-LBK culture of the Stichbandkeramik (SBK) at the site of Hrdlovka, Bohemia. It has long been hypothesised that the LBK ended in widespread crisis, on the basis of mass burial sites with evidence for violence, such as Talheim and Herxheim in the west of the LBK and Asparn/Schletz, Lower Austria, in the LBK’s eastern distribution (e.g. Farruggia 2002). However, the SBK has never fitted this model easily, with plenty of mixed deposits. In the authors’ opinion, the Hrdlovka site provides unequivocal data for uninterrupted development from LBK to SBK. The material and structural evidence from longhouses are considered, and alongside the architecture, the pottery, animal bones and lithics are also analysed. The paper concludes that in contrast to other regions of the LBK, the changes at Hrdlovka were the result of a smooth transition.

The next two papers arise from sites in Poland, at either end of the Neolithic. Połczyński and Michalak propose that sunken-floored buildings were present at LBK sites, challenging the hitherto prominent focus on the longhouse as the sole form of architecture. The paper argues that in fact a variety of different structures were possible within the LBK, as were the number of possible uses a building could have. The authors suggest the ‘sunken-floored’ structures were ancillary buildings for activities such as processing food and cooking. This paper throws up questions about how we define a house; what is it that makes a longhouse a ‘house’? It was surely used for more activities than sleeping and cooking, such as stalling animals during winter months. Why is it that some buildings can become such focus for the formation and expression of identity, while others fade into the background?

In the second paper on the Polish evidence, Czerniak and Pyzel investigate the longhouse phenomenon in the Chalcolithic Brześć Kujawski culture in the Polish Lowlands. The Brześć Kujawski culture was part of

the late Lengyel interaction sphere, that was spread from Hungary northwards into Poland, between 4400–3900 cal BC. The paper examines the variability of the trapezoidal houses, and argues that the inhabitants worked to ensure a strong degree of uniformity between all of the houses. The authors propose that this was a deliberate strategy to stress local identity. In the face of growing hierarchies at the beginning of the metal ages, were the Brześć Kujawski communities asserting a strong sense of belonging to a regional group or actively denying the growing pressure from increasing inequalities?

The final paper asks why the post-LBK groups that inhabited the landscape between Cologne and the Netherlands (middle Neolithic in this region of Europe) avoided former LBK settlement areas. In contrast to the LBK-SBK transition considered by Vondrovský *et al.*, in this region there are distinct changes in pottery, burial practices and settlement forms between the LBK and post-LBK cultures of Grossgartach (GG) and Rössen (RS). Biermann considers whether the lack of overlap in settlement areas and changes in house plans between the LBK and GG-RS resulted from ‘taboo’, respect for ancestors, or possible changes to the availability of suitable trees for construction in the landscape. While the author is reluctant to conclude that the middle Neolithic longhouse in this region was solely determined by environmental constraints, the fact that middle Neolithic houses required less wood in their construction does suggest some combination of both factors. This paper demonstrates that taking the material fabric of houses seriously can be an informative route into considering change over time.

3 Conclusions

Above all, the papers in this special edition demonstrate the importance of challenging the idea that there is one central idea of the ‘house’ which spreads with the Neolithic, but rather there were many different responses to shaping the built environment, identity and social organisation as farming spread across the European continent. Similarly, there is not a single ‘one size fits all’ methodology that will reveal Neolithic houses and households. Instead a multitude of different techniques will be appropriate to different regions, depending on house form, associated material culture, daily and ritual practices around houses, waste products, settlement patterns and preservation rates. The key is locating where the house sits within this diverse network of social, economic and environmental activity and agency, examining how it was elaborated, changed through time and framed by social action.

In conclusion, we would like to highlight the following three avenues of research that seem to us important strands in any future agenda for the archaeological study of houses and households. The first is close attention to the materials of the house. Previously this analysis has often been carried out to determine the functional properties of the structure, but it would now be worth revisiting these questions from the perspective of the ‘material turn’. This requires engaging with how different building materials and artefacts associated with houses intersected with social practices, identity creation and the development of systems of power. The second is developing and modelling the temporal and spatial variation between houses. Bayesian statistical modelling of radiocarbon dates is now providing detailed and accurate histories of house duration and the tempo of change, allowing variation of time and house chronologies to be written at multiple scales simultaneously (Bayliss *et al.* 2015; Marciniak *et al.* 2015; Draşovean *et al.* in prep). This can now be coupled with detailed studies of the artefactual and ecofactual data. Together with new methods (such as lipid analysis of pottery and microwear analysis), this will help to tease apart the temporal rhythm of activities and practices taking place within houses and the variation between houses over space and time. The third and final avenue of research we would like to promote is to challenge the conception of the household as a bounded or static entity, by investigating the household as an integral part of a wider social network, and considering the ways in which social units appropriated and created household spaces. The fluidity in the sociality of the house and the forms of membership associated with house structures were not fixed in the Neolithic, and it is in capturing this flow of house and household practice, that we get closer to revealing Neolithic lifeways and histories.

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