

Houses and collective constructions of Western Asia

Collective houses and constructions: defining the habitat and the social activities of Neolithic societies in Western Asia

House and household in the Neolithic

Abstract

Ideas of house, and even home, have long been part of Neolithic narratives (cf Cauvin 1994; Hodder 1990; Watkins 1990). However, ‘house’ is not a neutral term, but carries implicit social and cultural meaning. Attempts have been made to problematise these comfortable present-day concepts, but they remain very much baked into our conception of the Neolithic (Finlayson et al. 2011a). They are an integral component of domestication and increasing sedentism – both key aspects of our perspective on the Neolithic. Inevitably, reference to the notion of the household, and even the household society, grows out of these houses, with a dynamic interplay between collective community (or ‘village’) organisation and the segmentary forces of independent and self-contained households (e.g. Byrd 1994).

Archaeological knowledge of Neolithic architecture has developed enormously since these concepts became embedded in our terminology, perhaps especially in our knowledge of collective structures, and it seems time for a comprehensive review. Is “house” a useful term, or simply shorthand, and if the former can we actually track its emergence as an important element of social evolution? Building on that, can we see evidence for household societies (in an anthropological sense) within the Neolithic? In this paper I am considering the Neolithic evidence, primarily from southern Jordan – taking into account both regional diversity and long-term development paths.

Key words: House, Household, Neolithic, Structure, Home

Introduction

One of the enduring tropes of the Neolithic is the idea of a complete package and a narrative of domestication and sedentism. The house is part of that narrative and ideas of house, and even home, have long been part of Neolithic narratives (cf Cauvin 1994; Hodder 1990; Watkins 1990; Wilson 1988). These ideas are part of an understanding of the Neolithic as the period when people became like us, socially or perhaps even cognitively modern, and it therefore appears appropriate to use such comfortable modern domestic terminology, and maybe to group these ‘houses’ together into ‘villages’ (Finlayson et al. 2011a). However, while for some this modernity is part of an overt theoretical position, for others it becomes simply an unproblematised aspect of the Neolithic (Finlayson 2013). The terms are rarely used without considerable meaning attached, at its most simple an understanding that Neolithic people lived in houses, that small houses were probably for small nuclear families, and larger houses indicate the development of extended families and self-contained households within growing villages (e.g. Byrd 1994).

Our archaeological knowledge has grown enormously in recent decades, revealing a more complex built environment than simple houses in a village. Over the same period, our appreciation of hunter-gatherer social complexity has also grown, with debate on whether hunter-gatherer huts count as homes (Maher & Conkey 2019). The investment in place, especially with the construction of stone buildings, made during the Natufian, clearly represents a change from what went before. However, we need to be wary of ideas that oppose hunter-gatherer huts with Neolithic houses, or indeed with ideas that stone constructions in some way equate to sedentism (Boyd 2006). Furthermore, Natufian architecture goes beyond the simple domestic: at Mallaha it includes the first apparent communal building (Valla 1991). Whatever happens with architecture and the built environment in the Neolithic, it has its roots in a hunter-gatherer past.

Part of the reason why we should consider the nature of architecture carefully is that there has been conflation of archaeological remains and the social identification of the house and household, as discussed by Levi-Strauss (1983). Ian Kuijt has made much use of this concept of social organisation, and importantly inheritance – but it is important to recognise that Kuijt’s main deployment of Levi-Strauss has not been in discussions of domestic architecture but of mortuary practices, seeing these practices as a more fruitful line of evidence for this approach to Neolithic society (Kuijt 2000). Kuijt goes further in following Levi-Strauss by separating the House, a “social, ritual, and economic unit”, from the architectural construction, noting that the House can be composed of multiple households living in separate residential units.

Successful adoption of the household concept, actually based on architecture and settlement layout, doesn’t really happen until the EBA in Meredith Chesson’s work (Chesson 2003; Chesson & Goodale 2014). She looks at the physical structures, or houses, describing them as “a dynamic type of material culture that people create for themselves in a series of decisions involving the availability and desirability of construction and decorative materials” (Chesson 2012, 45), where it is the materiality of living spaces that concern her, working with multiple theoretical stands of place making, structured agency, embodiment and lived experience, and social memory.

The house is one of those apparently hard to define but easy to recognise concepts – because it is an everyday modern concept. We all know within our own cultural references what a house is and what happens in the house, but it is dangerous to use these comfortable modern references. The comfortable ideas of house, of people domesticating themselves, and the population of the Neolithic world being compared with quasi modern-peasants put us into a conceptual straightjacket. The household, or House concept, gets confused with the notion of the house as a comfortable domestic residence. We need to step back a little from this in the Neolithic, and return, as Chesson does in the EBA, to the material evidence. The call for the conference that led to this paper included the descriptor “the architecture of inhabited spaces during the Neolithisation process”. This phrase may be more cumbersome than “house” but it may be a much more helpful neutral starting point.

I follow the work of Brian Byrd and Ted Banning (Banning & Byrd 1987; Byrd 1994; Byrd 2000). In this I am building on work Cheryl Makarewicz and I have done at Beidha (Makarewicz & Finlayson 2018), and picking up on the work of Janet Carsten (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Carsten 2018). I’m more interested in the biographies of buildings and the active use of architecture in everyday social negotiation as the built environment becomes an increasingly important element of people’s lives. I assume that architecture is serving to help