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The Neolithic of the Aegean Islands: A New Picture Emerging

Nikos EFSTRATIOU

ABSTRACT: Recent developments in the area of the Aegean islands and the adjacent coastal regions (new excavations, reinvestigation of old sites, surveys) have produced an impressive amount of new evidence concerning habitation patterns during the early prehistoric period. The fragmentary picture of island occupation which characterized the Aegean area for decades, is now enriched by evidence which, although in many respects still preliminary, allows key-issues of prehistoric processes such as bio- and socio-geography, transition, Neolithization, regionalism to be re-assessed. This paper is an attempt to comment upon the essence and use of concepts such as biogeography and socio-geography within the context of early Aegean prehistory.

I. The early prehistory of the Aegean islands has been the focus of continuous archaeological interest, over the last two decades. The Aegean island complex, whether as part of a wider debate concerning prehistoric island settlement in the Mediterranean, a subject often blown out of proportion, on account of the more general bio-geographic issues involved, which transcend their specific spatial-temporal context¹, or at other times, as part of interpretative approaches concerning individual cases of islands in the Eastern Mediterranean, like Cyprus and Crete², has often been the center of serious investigation concerning island cultural processes³.

It is unfortunate that the study of such an important area had not managed, until very recently, to go beyond the level of speculation to the level of systematic local research and collection of new data⁴. The reasons are many, and they could be classified into two main categories: **1.** On the research level, one could mention low interest on behalf of archaeologists, objective difficulties concerning access, the dramatic geomorphological and geological rearrangements, which influenced the present appearance of the area, as well as the inaccessibility of many neighbouring coastal areas, for a long period of time. **2.** At the level of theoretical approaches, the degree of emphasis paid until now to biogeographical

factors, at the expense of a socio-geographic theory, could be considered an exaggeration; the latter theory would allow, quite apart from the issue of environment dynamics, the investigation of the role of social factors and relations, at all levels (communal, inter-communal), for the understanding of basic island cultural processes.

II. Until now, the idea of an early human presence on the islands was only glimpsed through some sporadic finds of the Middle Palaeolithic, but even that thought was strictly defined by palaeogeographical parameters (eustatic changes, proximity to the mainland), which resulted in the division of the islands into land bridges (temporary islands) and oceanic (true islands)⁵. It has been my opinion for many years now⁶, that such theories were either never based on data from on the spot investigations (islands, coastal areas), which would normally take the various local peculiarities into consideration, (i.e. seismic tendencies), or they were just designed to test specific theoretical models. Such theories were almost entirely the result of an armchair conception of the Aegean area with misleading results.

1. New archaeological evidence in recent years, even if still only indicative from the point of view of quantity and geographical distribution, is nevertheless impressive in terms of information - almost upsetting the status quo I would say - and leads us to a substantial re-evaluation of the known facts about the Aegean.

¹ MacArthur & Wilson 1967.

² Held 1989; Broodbank & Strasser 1991, 233.

³ Patton 1996.

⁴ Bintliff 1977; Cherry 1981; 1990; Efstratiou 1981, 315.

⁵ Cherry 1981; 1990.

⁶ Efstratiou 1985, 77.

More specifically, the pre-Neolithic finds of the Gioura cave in the Sporades (Mesolithic, Aceramic)⁷, and the fact that the old but doubted site of Maroulas on Kythnos, in the Cyclades⁸, can be securely considered as a Mesolithic settlement⁹, allow us for the first time to place the first human presence in the Aegean islands, in the transitional phase to the food producing stage. To these facts, one could add the new archaeological data from the significant and extensive Neolithic settlement at Knossos, which emerged as a result of a new trench, excavated in the Central Court of the Minoan palace; when it is completed, it will shed light on the chronological, palaeo-environmental and cultural characteristics of this early organised settlement in Crete, one of the earliest and largest in the Aegean. Unfortunately, the study of this material, which is expected to close many gaps stemming from the old investigations of J. Evans in the early 1960's, such as aspects of the geomorphology of the site, the palaeo-environment, production strategies of the first colonists of the island and chronology, has only just started¹⁰.

The number of Late Neolithic sites, a period when prehistoric settlement in the islands was generalised, also increased in recent years, in areas such as the Sporades and the Cyclades (Mykonos, Amorgos), adding new evidence to the picture of the Aegean Neolithic and creating the preconditions for a better recognition of the process of colonisation and human dispersion¹¹. To all this, one should add the sudden, increased interest of many researchers, in the islands and the coastal area of the Northeast Aegean.

III. Three dominant theories are in my opinion, currently under reconsideration on account of these new developments: **1.** The theory that the Aegean islands were not ideal candidates for the establishment of pre-Neolithic sites with specific cultural habitation traits (type-sites) and a socio-economic reproduction (economy, technology, ideology). **2.** The theory that early phases of the Neolithic

on the islands (as they became known from sites like Ag. Petros in the Sporades and Knossos on Crete), are isolated cases and do not indicate a human presence in the area as a result of certain wider socio-economical and technological conditions; they are, on the contrary, considered simply as colonisation "episodes". **3.** The theory that the main settlement movement in the Aegean islands, when it was inaugurated in the Neolithic, should be interpreted, directly, or indirectly, through bio-geographical factors, like those reported in the, by now, classic paper of MacArthur & Wilson (1967) (area and distance effect, species equilibrium, founder effect, etc).

IV. It appears that these observations create, in my opinion, a whole new picture, as regards theory and research: **1.** They place the Aegean islands in a context, where, in principal, it seems that the transition from the hunter-gathering to the food-producing economy can be attested and studied. Considering that basic notions, such as mobility, sedentism, permanency, economic behaviour, and environmental or climatic factors, are still vague, it perhaps requires some degree of optimism to claim that in this case, the context of developments is clearer than that in the case of other islands of the eastern Mediterranean region, like Cyprus, where a gap of 2000 years is attested¹². **2.** In contrast to what was believed until now¹³, it has been proven that food-gathering groups from the end of the Pleistocene onwards, not only did not avoid settlement on islands, because they supposedly ignored them or were unable to colonise them, but they had actually already adapted to the new conditions; according to the evidence from Gioura, they had already adopted, probably from neighbouring coastal areas, or developed themselves, a specialised food-producing or transportation technology (fishing, transportation), which allowed them to survive in a particularly idiosyncratic and demanding environment. Although the evidence that would permit the application of a comprehensive model for approaching early human presence in the Aegean islands, is lacking, a model similar

⁷ Sampson 1996.

⁸ Honea 1965, 277.

⁹ Sampson (personal communication).

¹⁰ Efstratiou 1981.

¹¹ Sampson 1997.

¹² Knapp 1994, 377.

¹³ Cherry 1990, 202.

to that proposed for other areas, like Cyprus (even if it has not been yet proved archaeologically)¹⁴, I believe that there are some indications, which could lead to, at least, a re-evaluation of some earlier theories.

V. More specifically, it is significant, that in recent approaches of the phenomenon of island archaeology, one can discern a tendency to avoid a biogeographical concept of the island settlements, which until now ranged exclusively between ecology and evolutionary biology (interaction between animal, plant and human behaviour). At the same time, the attempt is made to form a socio-geographic theory, where social dynamics are thought to be equally responsible for the presence of specific adaptive strategies, which lead to specialised economic and cultural expressions; these factors often tend to contradict established views concerning the relationship between animals and the environment, as well as their consequences in the decision-making processes¹⁵. Ethnographic studies, on the other hand, often used in recent years in this particular context, even if they do communicate experiences from very different geographical areas like Polynesia for example, despite the objections they may be raising, do enrich the dynamics of interpretation on many counts. The reason is that such ethnographic studies tend to dissociate many of the decision-making processes from environmental and geographical aspects, on every level, something which might be considered as a binding objective pre-condition; they, in fact associate these decision-making processes with different forms of social power and symbolism (i.e. through the control of sacred knowledge, ritual practices, initiation ceremonies or access to socially valued material goods), thus upgrading essentially the importance of the socio-geographic approach¹⁶.

Most interpretations for island developments, whether they relate to early habitation patterns (colonisation), or to the appearance of later, more complex socio-economic phenomena (monument-oriented and exchange-oriented societies), in places such as

Malta, Crete and Melos, seem to lie in between these two reference points.

VI. My position is that both biogeographic and socio-geographic approaches, judging by a rather general and empirical description of their characteristics, are only useful and non-antithetic, when they do not express deterministic or simplistic interpretative views. I would like, however, to briefly touch upon certain thoughts concerning the application of these approaches in the context of the discussion relating to the problem of early human presence in the Aegean islands, as well as to the new archaeological data and their interpretation: **1.** I believe, that both the basic bio-geographic characteristics of the islands, i.e. their distance from the mainland, their size, their geographic position, their ecology, and the dynamics of the socio-economic relationships in the wider Aegean basin, with unfortunately, more or less, unknown characteristics, functioned side by side and with equal power, as essential conditions for the early human presence on the islands. Judging by the few tools from the various islands (Ionian Islands, Sporades), dated to the Middle Palaeolithic, such a phenomenon can be placed at the end of the Pleistocene. It is in this early stage, which has been already defined by Cherry as “the earliest utilisation of an island”¹⁷, that one should expect isolated population units in the islands; their simple cultural modes of social, economic and technological behaviour (seasonal camps, experimental boat technology), are still in the process of adaptation, and they do not yet lead to the appearance of socio-political complexity. In this phase, where the ecosystemic cultural component is particularly strong, it is extremely difficult, in my view, to evaluate and compare the two approaches or to juxtapose them as regards their demonstrative value. Moreover, it is even more difficult to follow methodological research priorities, especially since the biogeographical approach is inherently accessible from the point of view of research.

2. My next comment refers to a second evolutionary stage, where these primary island cultural characteristics are undergoing a phase of consolidation (Cherry’s “earliest

¹⁴ Held 1992.

¹⁵ Patton 1996.

¹⁶ Meillassoux 1972; Bender 1985.

¹⁷ Cherry 1990, 198.

occupation”), acquiring social significance and gradually creating the conditions for their communal conceptualisation and symbolisation. This stage, which could be placed in the Mesolithic, or in the Aceramic and Early Neolithic periods, is related, in my opinion, to the appearance of the first specialised installations (special-purpose sites), organised settlements and permanent settlements in the Aegean (Gioura cave camp, Ag. Petros and Knossos settlements). The significance of the socio-geographic approach in this case is essentially increased, to the point of replacing it altogether, compared to the limitations imposed by the biogeographic description. It is a phase, concerning which, archaeological reasoning is insistently seeking the interpretative contributions of ethnographic and anthropological data. In this case, the study of social dynamics and of human behaviour in relation to factors, such as technology for example, can upset the previously existing equilibrium between the bio- and socio-geographic approaches (it is not simply relevant as Held is suggesting)¹⁸. Typical is the discussion over the appearance of sophisticated technologies such as the use of boats, which many believe may stimulate social evolution with economic, political, and symbolic implications¹⁹.

3. In other words, I believe that the use of the bio- and socio-geographic approach can not be either general or atemporal in the context of an empirical analysis of social dynamics. In my opinion, there are archaeological data which could help distinguish such chronological periods, where the socio-geographical approach, as an interpretative line, collides with or replaces, almost entirely, the biogeographical approach. The presence, for example, of a specialised tool assemblage, judging by the finds (hooks) from Gioura, of Mesolithic date, the insistent indications of storage at Knossos (large pots in the Aceramic period), the decorated pottery of Ag. Petros (Early Neolithic), or the specialised productive procedure at Saliagos (tuna fishing), can all be considered as evidence for new social dynamics

appearing in the Aegean islands for the first time. These dynamics do, I believe, create also the conditions for symbolisation and conceptualisation of certain objects or of a specific socio-economic behaviour, which, by functioning in an ideological realm, can in their turn, be considered responsible for many of the developments in the islands.

Concluding, I believe, that this period of “consolidation” is exactly when issues, such as human interaction (intra- or inter-societal), exchange networks, territorial boundaries, cultural identity, etc., acquire a real and influencing content. Finally, the fact that this period, judging by the new finds in the Aegean area, can be moved so far back in time, is in itself quite impressive.

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¹⁸ Held 1989, 11.

¹⁹ Arnold 1995, 733.

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