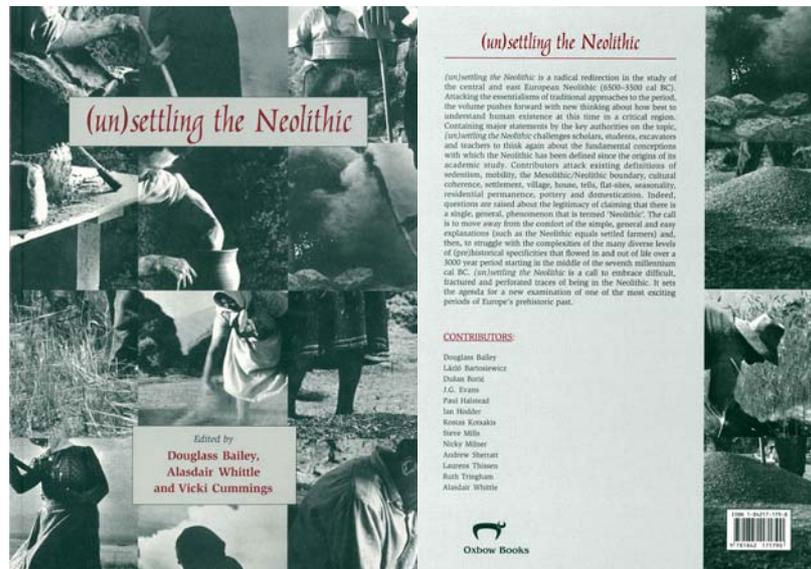


Bailey, D., A. Whittle & V. Cummings. Eds. 2005. (Un)settling the Neolithic. – Oxford, Oxbow Books

Book review by L.G.L. van Hoof



We have come a long way since Childe's introduction of the concept of a Neolithic *Revolution*. Since the 1980s it has been through the work of people like Marek Zvelebil, that we have come to look at the process of neolithisation more as a gradual, long-term process than as a real revolution. Also, the role of the Mesolithic people has come more and more to our attention. Finally, the last few years both recent discoveries and theoretical orientations have come to undermine many of the associations we have long connected to the Neolithic. The findings of ceramics used by hunter-gather-fishermen communities and dated over 10,000 years BP in Japan, China, the Russian Far East and Eastern Siberia, caused a shock. Ceramics had of course for a long time been considered as a firm characteristic of at least a society-becoming-Neolithic, if not of a Neolithic society. And theoretical debates on what it means to become Neolithic have ranged from more broad-scaled narratives like Hodder's concept of the *domus* versus the *agrius*, to ideas that have focused much more on individual experience. The compilation of articles edited by Bailey, Whittle & Cummings attacks one of the other concepts that immediately comes to mind when we think of a Neolithic society: sedentism, using both field data and new theoretical perspectives. The goal of the editors therefore is "to rupture the simple equations between residence, economy, materials, transitions and origins" (p. 1). However, next to a critique and shots at deconstructing the concept of the Neolithic, most contributors also try to provide a new way of constructing the Neolithic. Therefore the title: both settling and unsettling the Neolithic.

When reading the different contributions, it becomes clear that there is a sharp dividing line around page 63, which is almost exactly in the middle of the book. The first group of contributions clearly focuses on the sedentism-debate, mainly using arguments provided by the natural sciences (archaeozoology, earth sciences, physical anthropology, etc.) in their quest. The second group of contributions in contrast focuses much more on the experience of Neolithic life, using concepts from the social sciences and art history. This difference becomes already clear whilst just browsing the pages, looking at the illustrations. In the first part these consist mainly of graphs, sometimes accompanied by pictures showing for example the "arthritic deformation of the distal end of a sheep *metapodium*" (p. 52). In the second part almost all illustrations are pictures, many of them giving an overview or a reconstruction of the site or region treated, to make the reader visualise and therefore more or less experience the treated subject. By trying to unite these two different groups of articles, it seems the editors have not chosen the easiest way. In many ways it really seems that you are reading two totally different books, written for two very different audiences. However, if planned as such, this might just be a very interesting concept, for it might prove to people positioning themselves on either side of the divide between the more natural-science-based (read processual) and the more social-science-oriented (read post-processual, post-modern, narrative, etc.) approaches to archaeology, that the other side has an interesting story to tell as well.

So what are the stories the different contributors want to tell? The first group of contributions partly focuses on methodological considerations in proving or disproving sedentism. Many of these treat the problem of the time-depth of your archaeological data: when we find indications for the use of a site in winter and in summer, does this mean year-round habitation, or does this mean that at one point in time people used the site in summer, and at possibly a very different moment in time activities were carried out in winter? And how

representative are these data for the activities carried out on the site? etc. Another debate that seems to return in almost every article regards the geological record of a site. When there are indications of incidental flooding of a site, does this immediately mean it was not permanently used? Many different examples from many different regions show that when looking at the specific contextual information of the various sites, very different answers can be given. It seems therefore that diversity is an important message. Diversity in settlements can also be seen as the important point made by the second line of thought in this group of contributions. Most of the contributions treat the Neolithic of southeastern Europe, which to most of our minds will mean: tells. The second line of thought in this group is to show that there is a much larger variation of Neolithic settlements in this region than just tells. And that these settlements, and probably even the tells, are much less sedentary than often thought. At the same time e.g. Borić (p. 22–25) and Milner (p. 32–33) show that Mesolithic settlements might have had a much longer lifetime than often suspected. Therefore, an important message is that sedentism does not necessarily mean Neolithic, and that Neolithic does not necessarily mean sedentism.

In the second group of articles again a division is obvious. Whittle (p. 64–70) and Bailey (p. 90–97) try to sell a model, but than seem to lose track of their model in their case studies. Whittle's model gives much attention to emotions, values, etc., but in the end we are left with well known concepts like communitive feasting, identity markers, etc. And Bailey seems to be more concerned with deconstruction than with construction. When claiming that he does not want to use analogies, of course that leaves out the fact that he uses the analogy that Neolithic tell-builders should be like 20th century minimal artists. Also for Mills' contribution (p. 79–89) many methodological problems seem to raise their heads. Most importantly: does he really think the landscape has no history? The way the landscape was used, the way it was created (very often by humans that might leave nice hedges between their fields that provide good habitats for birds or will even cut these last relics of woodlife, etc.) of course has a profound influence on both the cultural and natural soundscape. So does he presume the 20th century Romanian landscape mimics in its natural and cultural aspects the Neolithic landscape? Or what does otherwise seem to be the value of his recordings? I could of course continue with the criticisms against these contributions, but perhaps the points their writers want to prove are too complex to come across clearly in the small number of pages assigned to them. So, it might be better to move to the next contributions that prove to be interesting reading material. Tringham (p. 98–111), Evans (p. 112–125) and Hodder (p. 126–139) treat the specifics of tell-formation and inhabiting a tell in a new and refreshing way. All three authors work in a contextual way, using their excavation data to come to interesting new insights concerning the role of fire, identity-formation and continuity, and dwelling in a tell-house. The points they want to make are in many ways as theoretically inspired and as 'soft' as those of Bailey and Whittle, but all in all these last contributions are much more convincing and inspiring.

All in all '(Un)settling the Neolithic' can be quite an inspiring book, inviting you to try new ways of looking at the Neolithic. The *caveats* and case studies presented have a lot of insights to offer, also for those not working in tell landscapes. Unfortunately, it sometimes seems that the divide between the two groups of articles is unbridgeable, and many hard-core processual archaeologists will consider the contributions of Bailey and Whittle to prove all their pre-conceptions about post-processual archaeology. Hopefully than, readers from both positions will find enough in the different contributions to find new insights and inspiration, perhaps even from the group of people you least expected it to come from...

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