

Autumn Meeting 2015

House Societies in Neolithic Eurasia

Organiser: Julian Thomas

10.30am-5.00pm Monday 2nd November 2015

**The Stevenson Lecture Theatre (lowest level of the Great Court), the British Museum,
London**

NB Please organise your own refreshments on arrival and lunchtime: we only provide afternoon tea!

- 10.00 *Coffee (available for purchase at outlets in the Great Court)*
- 10.30 *Welcome / introduction Timothy Darvill*
- 10.40 *Introduction: House societies and the Neolithic Julian Thomas*
- 11.00 *House and home revisited Trevor Watkins*
- 11.20 *Living with the dead: Mortuary practices and household identities in the Neolithic of Southwest Asia Karina Croucher*
- 11.40 *Elusive houses and complex households in the later Neolithic of northern Mesopotamia Stuart Campbell*
- 12.00 *House histories: the tempo of dwelling in the European Neolithic Alex Bayliss, Alistair Barclay, Bissierka Gaydarska, Derek Hamilton, Seren Griffiths & Alasdair Whittle*
- 12.20 *House societies in the Central European Neolithic? Penny Bickle*
- 12.40 *Lunch (make your own arrangements)*
- 14.00 *To build a house: Neolithic house-societies in Southern Scandinavia Mats Larsson*
- 14.20 *Dwelling on the edge of the Neolithic: looking at life and death in the Dutch coastal area during the Late Neolithic G.R. Nobles*
- 14.40 *World enough and time — permanence and impermanence, performance and mobility associated with houses in earlier Neolithic Britain Seren Griffiths and Ben Edwards*
- 15.00 *House societies in the Irish Neolithic – a help or hindrance? Jessica Smyth*
- 15.20 *Tea*
- 15.50 *Dwelling in a passage tomb landscape Stefan Bergh*
- 16.10 *Hall societies? What form did house societies take in mainland Scotland? Kenny Brophy*
- 16.30 *Excavations at Green on the Isle of Eday, Orkney Mick Miles & Diana Coles*
- 16.50 *Discussion*
- 17.00 *Close*

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Abstracts

Introduction: House societies and the Neolithic

Julian Thomas (Manchester University)

In his book *The Way of the Masks* (1982) Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced the notion of the ‘house society’, a corporate social group that holds an estate of collective material and immaterial wealth. Here, the ‘house’ refers at once to a physical structure and the community who are attached to it, as, for instance, with the ‘House of Windsor’. Such a group is reproduced by transmitting its name, goods and titles across the generations, between members of the community who may be real or fictive kin. This transmission achieves its legitimacy through an ideology of kinship or affinity. From an archaeological point of view the critical feature of house societies is that their continuity is vested in material things: often the dwelling structure itself, but also the valuable goods that pass between the generations, signifying the unbroken existence of the community. Lévi-Strauss argues that such a house represents a ‘moral person’, a social actor which may compete or collaborate with others. In this contribution I will see the scene for today’s session, by demonstrating how the notion of house society has been employed in Neolithic archaeology.

House and home revisited

Trevor Watkins (University of Edinburgh)

With much more archaeological information emerging in recent years, my proposal (1990, *The origins of house and home? World Archaeology* 21/3) that the semi-subterranean structures at earliest Neolithic (9500 - 8500 BC) Qermez Dere, in north Iraq, were symbolic architectural expressions of the concept of ‘house and home’ needs to be revisited. The Neolithic ‘village’ has been an unquestioned archetype; the concept of a village seems familiar to us, making it natural to assume that the regular buildings within the village are the houses of ‘village-farming’ families. Evidence from more recently and more extensively excavated settlement sites of the same early period in Syria and Jordan suggests that life was lived communally, and buildings were used for communal food storage, communal food preparation, and for community rituals. It is only later in the Neolithic (after about 7500 BC), once farming economies had become established, that we find (monumental) houses that support the needs of a household economically, in terms of storage and processing, socially, in terms of everyday living, and as an arena full of symbolism and symbolic actions.

Living with the dead: Mortuary practices and household identities in the Neolithic of Southwest Asia

Karina Croucher (Bradford University)

Elusive houses and complex households in the later Neolithic of northern Mesopotamia

Stuart Campbell (Manchester University)

House histories: the tempo of dwelling in the European Neolithic

Alex Bayliss, Alistair Barclay, Bisserka Gaydarska, Derek Hamilton, Seren Griffiths and Alasdair Whittle, with Nenad Tasić, Miroslav Marić, Wolfram Schier, Florin Draşovean, Eszter Bánffy, Anett Osztaş, Arek Marciniak, Lech Czerniak, Colin Richards, and many others

The ‘house societies’ (*sociétés à maison*) model of Claude Lévi-Strauss famously defines the house, as a ‘moral person, keeper of the domain composed altogether of material and immaterial property, which perpetuates itself by the transmission of its name, of its fortune and of its titles in a real or fictive line, held as legitimate on the sole condition that this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship or of affinity, and, most often, together’. Furthermore, it asserts that ‘the whole function of noble houses, be they European or exotic, implies a fusion of categories which are elsewhere held to be in correlation with and opposition to each other, but are henceforth treated as inter-changeable: descent can substitute for affinity, and affinity for descent’. Can this model be so easily applied to a whole variety of situations in the European Neolithic as some of its recent protagonists seem to suggest? Whatever the anthropological complexities and the archaeological challenges, the model makes us think again about houses and draws attention to transmission, continuity and descent. Those dimensions involve time —and for that we badly need robust calendar dating.

This paper draws on the current ERC-funded project, *The Times of Their Lives*, to offer formally modelled date estimates for a range of situations in which houses and households are central features of dwelling. Specifically, we present a series of chronologies for house durations and the timing and tempo of their longer and wider histories. This takes us from the tells of Vinča-Belo Brdo, Serbia, and Uivar, western Romania, where house durations can be put into the context of tell histories, to the Lengyel site of Alsónyék, south-west Hungary, where formal modelling of the rapid growth and then almost equally rapid decline of this major settlement aggregation enables further inferences about the number and possible size of contemporary houses and households. We also note the contrasting durations of the big Late Lengyel houses at Racot, western Poland, and of the varied structures at the Grooved Ware settlement of Barnhouse, Orkney.

In some situations, houses appear to have lasted for a lifetime or so. Some had much shorter lives, and in certain instances could have been deliberately destroyed, either in unfortunate circumstances or to establish antiquity and renown. Others were much longer-lived, and might be candidates for the kind of continuity which Lévi-Strauss implies. How does this diversity in timings inform the debate on when the house society model may be useful, and when it may be importantly wrong? We also have to look carefully at the context in which houses appear — at neighbours and neighbourhoods, and at tenure of location through time.

House societies in the Central European Neolithic?

Penny Bickle (University of York)

Sociétés à maison (house societies; Levi-Strauss) is a theory of how households operate to ensure that such relationships can be reproduced. In arguing that the household was viewed as a ‘moral person’, Levi-Strauss draws on two related processes of reproduction: the legitimization of the household through kinship and its material and immaterial embodiment. Such themes are useful for examining prehistoric domestic architectures because they bring together social relationships and their material expression over time. However, in contrast to Levi-Strauss’ model of descent — in which the continuation of the house is prioritised over and above patrilineal or matrilineal descent systems — recent studies from isotope analysis, and to a certain extent aDNA, have presented the Linearbandkeramik (LBK) as a strongly patrilocal and patrilineal society. This paper will explore whether this means the notion of house societies can not be applied to the early Neolithic and whether we can track LBK descent practices. Levi-Strauss envisaged house societies as a form of organisation practised by societies in the process of changing from kin-based to class-based social structures. While this may not be the particular case for the LBK, the role of the house in social relationships in transition will also be explored.

To build a house: Neolithic house-societies in Southern Scandinavia

Mats Larsson (Liinaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden)

In house societies ‘the house’ functions as a social mechanism to subvert kinship and provides an opportunity for acquiring social control. However, the house is not only an institution holding immaterial wealth (such as names, title, kin strategies etc.) it is also a corporal structure, which contains material wealth and objects.

At the onset of the Neolithic two-aisled timber-built houses were introduced indicating a more solid and permanent settlement structure than that of the preceding Mesolithic. The building of houses that over time gets to be larger and more elaborate affected the Early neolithic society. The way in which people planned their sites, keeping the houses more or less clean and keeping work areas and waste pits away from the house is also a marked change from the previous period.

The importance of the longhouse in southern Scandinavia increased during the transition between the Middle Neolithic B and the Late Neolithic, 2400–2200 BC. The general change in architecture and the gradually increased range in sizes show that the longhouse in itself received a number of new symbolic and ideological meanings, closely connected with the establishment of a more evident settlement hierarchy consisting of single farmsteads and hamlets, signifying a more stratified society.

Dwelling on the edge of the Neolithic: looking at life and death in the Dutch coastal area during the Late Neolithic.

Gary Nobles (University of Groningen, The Netherlands)

The Dutch wetlands, particularly in the province of Noord-Holland, contain the remnants of at least 20 Late Neolithic settlements. This paper presents how artefact distributions can help to reveal the

habitual activities which are associated with everyday life. Such a spatial - material approach can also reveal or support the interpretation of spatial structures such as houses, activity areas and phases of activity. Whilst emphasis is placed on a place of the living these settlements can also become a place for the dead, I will argue that the transition between the two is best understood when the locations biography is taken into account.

World enough and time — permanence and impermanence, mobility and landscapes. A case study of an earlier neolithic house from Britain

Seren Griffiths, (Manchester Metropolitan University) and Ben Edwards, (Manchester Metropolitan University)

The concept of ‘the early neolithic house’ has taken on significance in discussion of the identity (Thomas 2013), processes of ‘Neolithisation’ (Sheridan 2011), and the nature of subsistence (Whitehouse et al. 2015) and domestic activity (Brück 2008) in early neolithic Britain. These structures are often superficially similar in plan, and show evidence for architectural motifs which strongly indicate shared above ground aesthetic traditions and understandings (though cf. Last 1996). In Ireland, the ubiquity of these structures has led to the recognition of a ‘house horizon’ (Whitehouse et al. in press; Cross 2003; Smyth 2014). The reification of ‘the neolithic house’, as well as the abstraction of more complex histories (Bayliss et al. 2011, 378), and activities (Brück 2008, 251) into shortlived ‘domestic’ narratives (cf. Thomas 1996; Bradley 2005) has significant implications for the kinds of societies and processes of change that we envisage.

Using a newly excavated ‘house’ structure and midden from Milfield, Northumberland, associated with Carinated Bowl pottery, this paper will emphasise the importance of recognising non-typical early neolithic ‘domestic’ structures, and their potential importance in processes of change, and evidence for regional patterns in early neolithic societies. Specifically we play off ideas of permanence and impermanence, enduring and ephemeral domestic architecture and other anthropogenic landscape modification, and the importance of ties to land and locality. We emphasise the importance of the performance houses not only as parts of shared aesthetic traditions, but at specific moments in time and space; as parts of dynamic, transformative processes in early, mobile, dispersed neolithic communities, against the wider backdrop of tensions associated with the first appearances of neolithic material culture and practices. In particular we emphasise the importance of relationships between ‘houses’ and the wider early neolithic use of landscapes, and the development of landscapes over time.

House societies in the Irish Neolithic – a help or hindrance?

Jessica Smyth (University of Bristol)

Neolithic houses are very visible in the Irish archaeological record, many of them uncovered during the course of large-scale infrastructural development of the past two decades. They have served as an important reminder of the sometimes very different regional settlement and farming systems that emerged across the northwest Atlantic islands in the 4th millennium BC. Currently, the total stands at around 90 Early Neolithic buildings, from more than 50 sites across the island. With attention recently focused on houses from southern England, and the ongoing discoveries across Orkney, it is timely to revisit this corpus and to more critically evaluate the role of houses in early farming societies. In particular, it must be stressed that the distinctive rectilinear post-and-plank Irish houses are a relatively short-lived phenomenon; the domestic architecture from the 36th century cal BC onwards leaves very different and generally more ephemeral traces in the archaeological record as well as diverging quite dramatically in terms of shape and design. The notion of ‘house societies’ can be an important aid in re-animating and re-positioning domestic architecture within our narratives. However, can the structure of a house society exist in the absence of sturdy, permanent buildings? How do we account for change in the settlement record? Is the notion of ‘house societies’ more of a hindrance than a help in understanding social reproduction in prehistory?

Dwelling in a passage tomb landscape: Thoughts on the concept of Landscape, Place and House based on the Mullaghfarna site, Co. Sligo, Ireland.

Stefan Bergh (National University of Ireland, Galway)

The extensive and densely-clustered circular ‘hut sites’ on the cliff faced plateau at Mullaghfarna, Co. Sligo was first recorded in 1911. It has since then occupied a unique position in Irish Prehistory as an enigmatic, possible ‘Neolithic/Bronze Age village’ without counterparts elsewhere on the island.

Due to its location in the dramatic Bricklieve Mountains and well within the 'ritual landscape' of the passage tombs complex of Carrowkeel/Keashcorran, the houses have long been associated with the nearby passage tombs. Trial excavations in three of the houses have returned Neolithic as well as Bronze Age dates.

The first detailed survey of the site has just been completed, recording some 165 round 'house foundations', 10 enclosures, as well as about 100 auxiliary area/spaces linked to the houses.

The house foundations show a wide variation both in size and construction and most of them are tightly clustered together. On the whole, the remains seem to represent a highly dynamic and intricate use of the given space on the plateau, expressed by construction mode, size and inter-relationships.

The paper will discuss some results from the survey touching upon aspects of place making; landscapes beyond the daily routine; collective vs. individual space in addition to the concept of 'house' in Neolithic/Bronze Age Ireland.

Hall societies? What form did house societies take in mainland Scotland?

Kenny Brophy (Glasgow University)

The house society concept has been convincingly developed for the Neolithic of the Western and Northern Isles, where stone buildings with recurrent architectural traits dominate. But can we recognise similar traditions in mainland Scotland where settlement evidence is dominated by pit clusters, light timber framed structures and a few exceptionally large communal timber halls? Can we recognise house societies in mainland Scotland? On balance, the answer seems to be a mitigated yes, albeit focus on halls, not houses. The framework of how we might recognise a 'house society' has already been laid out for eastern lowlands in particular, through for instance the recognition of recurrent architectural dimensions and traits within the timber hall group by Gordon Barclay. More broadly, connections between various rectangular timber structures of the 4th millennium BC – the halls, mortuary structures, timber cursus monuments and so on – have been recognised by Julian Thomas, Richard Bradley and Roy Loveday. And I have argued that the 'timber hall' form survived in various forms across that millennium, an idea that endured in tangible ruins and oral tradition. In this paper I will consider on the possibility that the entangled timber monument traditions of the Early Neolithic in mainland Scotland may represent a sort of 'hall society', and reflect on what such an approach can tell us about the lives and ideologies of the first farmers in northern Britain.

Excavations at Green on the Isle of Eday, Orkney

Mick Miles & Diana Coles

Excavations at Green on the Isle of Eday, Orkney, between 2007 and 2013 revealed a mid Neolithic settlement site of at least four buildings which had been in use at different times. The material assemblage suggests that this was a small, low status community, largely reliant on localised resources, that probably utilised the site over several generations.

The two largest & best preserved of the excavated buildings had been built & used sequentially with one being replaced by a larger one. Despite the temporal & physical differences between these structures there is, in many respects, discernible continuity, both in interior features & their usage & within the cultural material found.

Whilst it can be demonstrated that some change does occur during the period of occupation there is also evidence to suggest that aspects of their past are respected, even curated, by the later occupants of the site. Patterns of deliberate deposition occur at foundation, during usage & also at the closure of the earlier building. The latter suggests the later occupants had close ties to those who had gone before. At the heart of both buildings was a hearth, one complex, the other very large & it is apparent that these provided a particular focus for socially significant activity, some of which was ceremonial rather than 'functional'.