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Chapter I: Introduction

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When during the early years of this century Chr. Tsountas excavated the first Neolithic settlements in Thessaly and in Greece, he reached the conclusion that three periods could be discerned in this area: A, B and C, respectively Early and Late Neolithic and (Early) Bronze Age. He noted many arguments in favour of a subdivision of period A into two sections, but he also observed some factors which in the end prevented him from making the division and he left the problem to future investigators.

The research was continued by two English scholars, A.J.B. Wace and M.S. Thompson during the 1910's. They did not restrict their activities merely to excavating settlements, but made a more invaluable contribution to our knowledge with an exhaustive typology of the ceramic material. They did not, however, change Tsountas' division and as a result they separated the pottery types into an A group, characteristic of the "Early" Neolithic, a B group from the Late Neolithic and a C group from the Early Bronze Age. Until the end of World War II this model of the Greek Neolithic remained virtually unaltered. The ceramic material of the earlier Neolithic period became known as Sesklo ware and that of the later period as Dimini ware.

At the end of the 1940's the chronology of Aegean prehistory and more especially of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age was subjected to reconsideration, partly under the influence of recent discoveries in the Near East. For practical reasons this reinvestigation had to be based on already excavated material and stratigraphical drawings and not on new excavations, which made the subject a problematical one. The different investigators failed to reach a consensus of opinion on all but one point: they agreed that the Neolithic period should be divided into three major phases – Early, Middle and Late.

Weinberg (1942, p. 121; 1947, pp. 165-182), discussing the subject with the ceramic material from Corinth as his main evidence, drew a parallel between Thessaly II and the Late Neolithic, between Thessaly I and the Middle Neolithic and between the beginning of Thessaly I (and an earlier phase) and Early Neolithic. Miložčić on the other hand, mainly using the Thessalian material, proposed a division into five periods (1950/51, pp. 1-90). The first was a so called "Vor-Sesklo" (not to be confused with the present Vor-Sesklo) or Early Neolithic, the following two belonged to the Middle Neolithic, the fourth to the Late Neolithic and the fifth – Rachmani – belonged to the Chalcolithic. Schachermeyr (1955) agreed with Weinberg's crude division into Early, Middle and Late. In all these ceramo-typological discussions, absolute dating was also dealt with. On this point opinions were divergent.

It became clear that all these sequences had to be tested by new excavations. In Thessaly they have been carried out mainly by V. Miložčić and D.R. Theocharis from 1956 onwards – starting respectively at Argissa and Sesklo. The stratigraphy of the newly excavated sites proved the main division into Early, Middle and Late Neolithic preceding the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age to be correct, although it became evident that there existed many regional variants, especially where the Late Neolithic is concerned. As a result quite a number of sub-phases have been created.

The ceramic material known as Sesklo ware proved to be characteristic of the Middle Neolithic, but a distinct period, characterised largely by monochrome ware and some simple patterned painted ware, preceded it. At some sites an even older phase, apparently not yielding any pottery at all, was discovered. This was called the Pre-Pottery Neolithic, analogous to that of the Near East. The subse-

quent Early Neolithic could be divided into four sub-phases, the first of them being called Frühkeramik or Early Ceramic.

In 1972 the then director of the Sesklo excavations, Dr. D.R. Theocharis, proposed the preparation of a PhD thesis on the material from the Early Neolithic I period recently discovered at Sesklo. This seemed an interesting venture, especially if the study would include all data available from this period at Sesklo. In that way it might be a useful contribution to what had been published so far on Early Neolithic Greece. Most literature provided only limited information. Moreover, there was no consensus of opinion between the various authors; some seemingly even contradicted each other. The most extensive information on the subject had been given by Theocharis (1967), but even here data were largely concerned with pottery shapes, their possible ancestors and their development. Technical aspects were discussed only superficially and artefactual remains other than vessels were mentioned only briefly. He concluded that at the beginning of the Neolithic a virtually contemporaneous monochrome phase existed throughout Greece, from Macedonia to the Peloponnese. Discussing its origin, Theocharis rejected the until then widely held opinion that pottery had been introduced together with the domesticates from the Near East in favour of the idea that it was a local development rooted in the Preceramic phase. His view clashes with that of Weinberg in the Cambridge Ancient History. The latter recognises the existence of a Preceramic phase, but refuses to accept the theory that the ceramic Neolithic is rooted in this period. He thinks it was imported by a group of migrants from Palestine – basing this on a certain similarity in pottery ware and shapes.

The descriptions of the ceramic material provided by Theocharis, Weinberg and Milojević show some differences, which is partly due to the fact that they considered the material from their “personal” excavations – i.e. Sesklo, Corinth and Argissa – as most characteristic of the period in the whole of Greece. Other artefactual remains are often mentioned only superficially.

At Sesklo the rarity of remains other than pottery has forced us almost to confine our research to a kind

of catalogue-especially since the typology and technology of the other material will be treated more profoundly in a series of monographs, dealing with groups of artefacts and tracing their development over the entire time span of the prehistoric occupation at the site of Sesklo. The abundance of the ceramic material was such that both technology and typology could be studied and they will be treated at some length.

Detailed studies of the Sesklo material will enable us to explore some problems concerning the Early Neolithic period in Greece. It will be useful to investigate whether the typological sequence we have established for the pottery from Sesklo is recognisable in other areas of Greece too. Conversely, if a degree of regionalism is recognised, it will be possible to relate its first appearance to our chronological framework.

Attention had to be focussed also on the economy of Early Neolithic Greece. It was quite obvious that the origin of the change from a Mesolithic to a Neolithic way of life – the change in subsistence pattern – was, and still is, the greatest problem to anyone dealing with the period. There are no indications that the wild ancestors of emmer, sheep and goat had existed in Greece in the period preceding the Neolithic, yet the subsistence pattern of the Neolithic is largely characterised by the presence of emmer and sheep/goat. These species were almost certainly introduced in some way from the Near East – but whether this was by migrants or through other contacts is a problem which remains to be solved.

An interesting problem was the relation between the early Neolithic inhabitants of Greece and their environment. Would we be able to get some idea of the distribution of sites in relation to the landscape? We realised that this would not be a very easy question to answer, since little is known of the palaeoenvironment of Greece. Ecological studies have only recently been introduced in the field of Greek Prehistory.

In the course of our study we have attempted to find some answer to these questions. We knew in advance that we could do this only to a very limited extent, the data both from Sesklo and from the rest of Greece being far too restricted to allow certainties.

Despite these restrictions which would make it difficult to reach any sensible conclusions, we decided to give this account of our present knowledge of the Early Neolithic in Greece, for too often mistakes are made when material from this period is being used in discussion. We realise, and indeed we hope, that several of the blanks in this account may be filled by future research – and that as a result we may have to change some of our views.

We propose to discuss first the history of research

and the artefactual material from Sesklo and then to place the settlement in its wider context, after which we will gradually extend our discussion to the rest of Thessaly and Greece. Lastly we will investigate whether we can say anything on relations with the Near East. On the whole most attention will be focussed on pottery, since that is by far the most reliable material, but other artefacts are mentioned for all the sites. Some attention will be paid to ecological aspects too.



Fig. 2 Map of Thessaly with surrounding mountain ranges and reconstruction of Lake Viivis to its Neolithic dimension (free after Philippon).