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The articulation of a "New neolithic"

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1 Introduction

1.1 Point of departure

The Swifterbant Culture constitutes the earliest Neolithic (c. 4900-3500 BC) of the Pleistocene sands and wetlands between the rivers Scheldt and Elbe, encompassing large parts of the Netherlands and Lower Saxony (northwestern Germany). In geomorphological terminology, this area may be designated the western part of the North European Plain. The Swifterbant Culture was only recently recognised. While the earliest find was discovered in the 1950s at Schiedam (Modderman 1955), it was not until the 1960s that the name-giving excavations at Swifterbant started (see section 3.2). An important publication for the international appreciation of these new finds is Van der Waals' article on the beginning of the Neolithic in Belgium and the Netherlands *Die durchlochten rössener Keile und das frühe Neolithikum in Belgien und in den Niederlanden* (1972). In the following years, large-scale excavations on many of the cluster of sites at Swifterbant yielded enormous amounts of material remains from a Neolithic period hitherto unknown. The analysis of the data from this wetland location has occupied the excavators for many years. This has resulted in a large series of mostly preliminary reports on the various find categories (Bienenfeld 1985; Casparie *et al.* 1977; Clason 1978; Clason/Brinkhuizen 1978; Constandse-Westermann/Meiklejohn 1979; Deckers 1979; 1982; Meiklejohn/Constandse-Westermann 1978; De Roeвер-Bonnet *et al.* 1979; De Roeвер 1979; 1986; Zeiler 1986; 1987; 1991; 1997; Van Zeist/Palfenier-Vegter 1981) or sites (Price 1981a; De Roeвер 1976; Van der Waals 1977; Whallon/Price 1976). The only synthetic publication on the Swifterbant excavations is the Dutch-language preliminary report by Deckers *et al.* (1980). For Hazendonk, the other important site of this period excavated in the 1970s (see section 3.4), the various publications are primarily of a general character (Louwe Kooijmans 1976a; 1980a; 1987; 1993a). Owing to problems related to the stratigraphy of the site, it proved very difficult to allocate the finds to any of the seven consecutive occupation phases. This inhibited a definitive analysis of the excavation results. Still, the description of the Hazendonk finds is at the basis of a number of publications on the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition and subsequent developments in northwestern Europe (Hogestijn 1990; Louwe Kooijmans 1976b; 1987; 1993a).

There appears to be a scientific consensus on the nature of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in the western part of North European Plain: a large number of authors interpret the beginning of the Neolithic in this area as the incorporation of Neolithic elements into a Mesolithic way of life (Bogucki 1988, 161; Deckers *et al.* 1980; Kampffmeyer 1991, 352-355; Louwe Kooijmans 1993a; Thomas 1996b; Whittle 1996, 206; Zvelebil/Rowley-Conwy 1986, 78). It is this line of thought that is elaborated in this study: when, how and why were these new elements incorporated?

1.2 Research aims

The section above showed that the archaeological research on the Swifterbant Culture may be characterised as a combination of preliminary reports on the one hand and syntheses covering the study area on the other hand. One of the aims of this study is to resolve the archaeological problems which underlie this state of affairs. The uncertain dating of most Hazendonk finds was resolved by means of A. Jonkers' development of a software package which makes possible the allocation of the individual finds to specific occupation phases (Jonkers 1992; section 3.4.1). As a result of the availability of this package, it is now possible not only to analyse the Hazendonk finds in detail, but also to make a comparison of the material remains from this site with the other sites of the Swifterbant Culture, based on a systematic description of pottery and flint artefacts. Such a systematic analysis of intersite variability, based on samples from a number of sites, is found in chapter 3. It sheds light on the twenty-year-old debate about the similarities and differences between the pottery from the Swifterbant cluster and Hazendonk (Louwe Kooijmans 1976a; De Roeвер 1979 and sections 3.4.2 and 3.8.5). Through this systematic description of the material remains from the sites of the Swifterbant Culture, the gap between the site-oriented reports on the one hand and general, supra-regional discussions of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition on the other will be bridged by means of a regional study.

After an extensive discussion of the Swifterbant Culture in itself (chapter 3), this study will focus on contemporary material remains from the neighbouring areas, especially the German Rhineland and Denmark, and the social relations

between the peoples of this larger area of northwestern Europe as expressed in their material legacy. The final chapter deals with the nature of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in northwestern Europe from a long-term perspective, starting with the period of the Linear Bandkeramik Culture and Late Mesolithic and spanning twenty centuries up to the advent of the Funnel Beaker Culture, i.e. 5500-3500 BC. In this context, the mechanisms of the incorporation of Neolithic elements in a Mesolithic way of life are an important topic.

1.3 From hunting and gathering to farming

Introduction

The domestication of plants and animals by societies traditionally dependent on wild food resources is often perceived as one of the giant leaps in the history of mankind. This may be illustrated by a citation from V. Gordon Childe's 1934 publication *New Light on the Most Ancient East*:

Two great revolutions in human culture fell within the scope of this book, the change from a food-gathering to a food-producing economy and the establishment of urban civilization based upon industry and commerce (1935 (1934), 283).

Ever since, the *Neolithic Revolution* has been a recurrent topic of research for archaeologists working in every part of the world, witness the sheer profusion of publications dealing with this subject (see the various references in this section and throughout this study). While it was Childe who first stressed the importance of this shift in subsistence strategy, the history of this research topic of course starts earlier, with the introduction of the terms *Mesolithic* and *Neolithic*. Following the division of prehistoric artefacts (and thus the prehistoric era) according to Thomsen's *Three Age System*, Lubbock further divided the Stone Age into an earlier phase characterised by chipped stone tools (*Palaeolithic*) and a later phase with ground or polished stone tools (*Neolithic*; Lubbock 1865). It was only seven years later that Westropp (1872) conceived the concept of the *Mesolithic* to bridge the chronological gap between the age of the Palaeolithic mammoth and reindeer hunters and the spread of the Neolithic beyond the Near East. For a long time, the Mesolithic period was seen as a phase of stagnation between two periods with a distinct 'high culture': the rock art of the Late Palaeolithic and the rich material remains of the Neolithic (Price 1988; Trigger 1988; Zvelebil 1986a). The traditional characterisation of stagnation during the Mesolithic may be illustrated by a quotation from Childe's *The Dawn of European Civilization*:

The mesolithic cultures just described prove the continued occupation of large tracts of Europe from the glorious days of mammoth-hunting and the existence there of sparse but vigorous populations that could expand when the introduction of cereals and domestic stock offered an enlarged food supply (1957 (1925), 14).

According to Grahame Clark, "it seemed happily symbolic that the new age should be represented by microliths, whose diminutive size neatly suggested their historical insignificance" (1978, 3).

The history of the terminology presented above is related to the history of the meaning of the terms *Mesolithic* and *Neolithic*: what are the connotations of these terms? At first, the Neolithic was simply characterised as the period in which ground or polished stone tools were used (Lubbock 1865). Later, other attributes were added. In Childe's terminology, pottery, agriculture, polished stone axes and houses are all elements of the Neolithic. Later, major importance was ascribed to the subsistence base of the Neolithic, which became its prime attribute (Thomas 1993, 362-369). By contrast, the Mesolithic was characterised by the total absence of these same attributes: no pottery, houses and domesticates. Moreover, the Mesolithic was marked by the presence of microliths. While in these terms the differences between the Mesolithic and Neolithic were quite clear, it sometimes proved difficult to relate archaeological phenomena to these concepts. It became apparent that some archaeological cultures did have some attributes of the Neolithic (for example pottery), but lacked others (for example domestic plants and animals). To resolve this problem of classification, three solutions have been proposed: refined terminology, the abolition of inadequate terminology or the identification of a prime attribute.

First, new terminologies have been developed to describe societies which fall between the Mesolithic and Neolithic templates. This has resulted in terminology such as *Pre-Pottery Neolithic* and *Forest Neolithic* (Zvelebil 1986a, table 2). This solution salvages the distinction between Mesolithic and Neolithic by means of distinguishing the 'major' attributes. In the case of the pre-pottery Neolithic, the absence of pottery is interpreted as being less relevant than the presence of domesticates, while the term Forest Neolithic concerns pottery-using hunter-gatherers, which gives the primacy to the use of pottery in the definition of the Neolithic.

Secondly, the abolishing of the existing terminology allows the study of regional developments without concern about the classification of archaeological data as either Mesolithic or Neolithic. In this way, it becomes unnecessary first to define the terms Mesolithic and Neolithic, then to place data into these categories and finally to study the process of neolithisation. Instead, the occupation history of a region may be studied directly on the basis of the available data. This solution to the problem of classification is certainly the most straightforward. Nevertheless, the terms Mesolithic and Neolithic may retain some function in archaeology: for many archaeological cultures, the classification is unproblematic and the terms may function as a shorthand description.

This point of view leads to a third solution to the problem of classification: to distill the most important attribute of the Neolithic for use as its prime marker. Already in 1915 Elliot Smith stated that the invention of agriculture was the most important feature of the Neolithic, as it formed a fundamental step in the development of mankind (Trigger 1988, 250). Nowadays, the primacy of subsistence strategy in the definition of the Neolithic period is widely though not universally accepted (see above on Forest Neolithic and Thomas 1993). The 'primacy of subsistence' view is followed here, not because of any supposed societal importance, but indeed for a pragmatic reason: while many attributes of society may only be inferred from archaeological evidence, subsistence data are often directly available and therefore allow a positive classification. In this study, the term Neolithic thus operates as shorthand for pre-Bronze Age societies with domestic animals and/or domestic plants, while Mesolithic societies lack both domestic animals (apart from dog) and domestic plants. It is stressed that this is a definition and a definition only.

Using domesticates as the primary attribute of the Neolithic entails two general provisions. First, the presence of domesticates is determined for a cultural unit rather than individual sites (cf. Zvelebil 1998, 11). Otherwise, hunting stations and residential sites operating in one settlement system would not both be classified as Neolithic. Moreover, this classification on the basis of groups of sites should allow a distinction between the occasional presence of imported cereals or domestic animals and the structural occurrence of domesticates. Second, on the basis of this first premise, the classification should be based on absence/presence data rather than proportional data (contra Zvelebil 1986a, fig. 3), because the main concern is the incorporation of domesticates in the subsistence base rather than the proportion of people's diet provided by domestic animals. This position may be clarified by reference to the Vlaardingen Group: the mammal-bone spectra from some sites are dominated by domestic animals, while other sites yield mainly bones from wild species. A classification on the basis of Zvelebil's availability model (1986a) would place some in his 'consolidation phase', while others would fall in the 'substitution phase'. In reality, these sites functioned within a single type of settlement system (see further section 4.5.2.1).

Extant models for the transition to farming

While the number of perspectives on the transition to farming may equal the number of publications on the subject, it does seem possible to group the various publications into two opposing views of the status of agriculture versus the hunter-gatherer mode of subsistence (Thomas 1996a, 123-124). These are discussed below. It is important to realise that the various opinions presented here not only reveal the personal

inclinations of archaeologists, but may also be placed in a sequence through time in which the proposed explanations are intimately linked with changing views on present-day hunter-gatherer societies. Every new perception of present-day hunter-gatherer societies affects the way in which the transition is explained. New perspectives do not replace older ones, but operate alongside existing hypotheses, leading to the wide spectrum of explanations available today. The first explanation of the transition to farming sprang from the notion that the farming way of life is superior to the hunter-gatherer mode of subsistence. This interpretation was based on studies of 'marginal' hunter-gatherers from areas like the Kalahari desert, Tierra del Fuego or the tropical forests of Asia and Africa. Based on their 'poor' material culture, their way of life was judged as being 'primitive', while farming enabled the construction of large dwellings, feasting and a rich material culture. This was thought to show the superiority of the latter mode of subsistence over that of the hunter-gatherers. From this perspective, the transition to farming is seen as inevitable and desirable. A second perspective on the superiority of farming developed in the 1960s. Lee and De Vore's *Man the Hunter* publication (1968) is widely seen as heralding a new appreciation of the hunter-gatherer way of life. Through this work, it became widely accepted that most, if not all, present-day hunter-gatherer communities enjoy a life of leisure, work very little and have a rich social life. The result of this revision of the appreciation of hunter-gatherer communities was that the stereotype of the marginal hunter-gatherer was replaced by a new one: *the original affluent society* (Sahlins 1972). Although it seems that this new stereotype provides a fundamental shift in perspective, I would argue that in this view, agriculture is still seen as the salvation of hunter-gatherer societies. While in the first perspective the hunter-gatherer mode of subsistence is interpreted as being inferior to the farming way of life and the adoption of farming may be seen as inevitable (Ammerman/Cavalli-Sforza 1973), the second perspective, that of affluent societies, has as its consequence that the transition to farming is interpreted as a response to catastrophic developments in the hunter-gatherer subsistence strategies (e.g. the extinction of oysters or failure in other major food categories (Zvelebil/Rowley-Conwy 1984, 110)), or a rise in population densities (Bogucki 1988, 219; Redding 1988). What unites the two perspectives is that farming is interpreted as the ultimate solution to the troubles of the hunter-gatherer way of life.

One could say that the two opposing views of hunter-gatherer communities are unjustifiably lumped together here. Didn't Lee and De Vore's publication emancipate the hunter-gatherer way of life and free present-day hunter-gatherer communities from the stigma of being living fossils of a basically Pleistocene way of life? Of course, the interpretation of the

hunter-gatherer way of life as no longer inferior to farming is extremely important, but a review of the publications cited above shows that farming is still regarded as a *deus ex machina* to solve the problems of hunter-gatherer communities. In other words, the explications of the transition to farming are still based on the vulnerability of hunter-gatherer communities, rather than their position of strength and choice, as is advocated below. One might characterise these perspectives as *externalist*, because they explain the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition by means of the external availability of domesticates. As such, these interpretations clearly fall within those (processual) perspectives on human societies which see the natural environment predominating human behaviour, rather than human culture functioning as the prime mover of social change.

From a second point of view, which in contrast might be labelled *internalist*, processes within the hunter-gatherer societies are put in the spotlight. According to this view, the transition to farming should not be interpreted as a failure of hunter-gatherer communities to continue their mode of subsistence or as inevitable because of the superiority of farming. Instead, it focuses on the incorporation of (elements of) farming as a subsistence strategy in a traditional way of life. This perspective may be placed in the scientific tradition in which the human agent is predominant in the creation of change and may be related to post-processual archaeology.

A notable offshoot of this internalist perspective focuses on social relations within the hunter-gatherer communities and their contacts with farming neighbours. These are seen as central to the creation of a new society. Zvelebil (1986a, 10) bases such an approach on the notion of ‘social disequilibrium’ in which competition for status, spouses or power triggers the transition to farming. This implies, again according to Zvelebil, that “(a) competition and disequilibrium are the natural state, (b) relations of dominance are latent, and (c) egalitarian systems are an exception” (1986a, 10). Such a characterisation of the internalist approach stigmatises it as being obsessed with struggle and dominance (Bender 1978; Orme 1977; Thomas 1988). I like to think that other social processes too could provide the incentive for changes such as the transition to farming. Chapter 5.3.3 offers an alternative view.

Of course there is no single world-wide explanation for the transition to farming. The favoured explanation is not only a direct product of the time in which the explanation is proposed and the theoretical orientation of the archaeologist, but also intimately linked with the character of the archaeological record in the area under study. This study of the Swifterbant Culture in the western part of the North European Plain aims to make a contribution to one of the central research themes of prehistoric archaeology: the transition from hunting and gathering to farming.