

CHAPTER ONE

COHESION AND DIVERSITY IN THE NEOLITHIC PELOPONNESE: WHAT THE POTTERY TELLS US

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INTRODUCTION

When we think of Neolithic Greece it is the classic Thessalian sites of Sesklo and Dimini that come to mind. Thessaly and Macedonia supported the highest density of Neolithic settlements.¹ In eastern Thessaly more than a hundred Early Neolithic and as many Middle Neolithic sites have been identified,² most of which were on average 2.25 km apart. Moreover, the size of these sites averages 3-4 ha which implies, at a conservative estimate, populations of around 100-300.³ These were villages not farmsteads. By contrast the Peloponnese looks decidedly underpopulated and many of the sites date from the Late or Final Neolithic period. Early and Middle Neolithic settlements were apparently few and far between.

How real is this contrast between the north and the south? Is it the case that the tell sites of Thessaly are much better preserved and can easily be recognised because they literally have a higher profile?⁴ Neolithic sites in the Peloponnese do not stand out in the landscape quite so obviously but if there were more they would surely have been identified as a result of the intensive surveys in the Korinthia, the Argolid, Arcadia, Laconia and Messenia. The evidence from these survey projects has been reviewed by Cavanagh, who concludes that there seems to be one major Neolithic centre in each broad catchment zone of around 30 sq. km and sometimes a number of small subsidiary sites.⁵ However, the pattern does vary and it is remarkable, for example, that the Laconia Survey did not locate any Early or Middle Neolithic sites. It was only in the Final Neolithic period that there was some activity east of the Eurotas, possibly by pastoralists.⁶ Does this absence of evidence demonstrate evidence of absence? Bintliff et al. are not convinced and have claimed that a progressive loss of sites has resulted in a 'hidden prehistoric landscape'.⁷ Essentially the sites disappear as the pottery disintegrates but this

¹ See for example the distribution map of Neolithic sites in Papathanassopoulos 1996, 198-9.

² Johnson and Perlès 2004, 67-70.

³ Perlès 2001, 176-80.

⁴ Johnson and Perlès 2004, 66-7.

⁵ Cavanagh 2004, 169-76, see also Johnson 1996.

⁶ Cavanagh 1999; Cavanagh and Crouwel 2002, 122-8.

⁷ Bintliff et al. 1999; 2000; 2002.

model does not work well in Laconia or Messenia.⁸ The Middle Neolithic pottery is durable and distinctive, whereas Final Neolithic pottery is extremely friable, yet this is the period for which we have sites. Of course the archaeological record is incomplete. Sites have been destroyed by a variety of natural and anthropogenic processes. Yet these survey projects have recorded a dramatic increase in the number of sites in the Early Bronze Age and it is therefore difficult to understand why the Neolithic period should be so underrepresented unless the Peloponnese was comparatively underpopulated at this time.

Before we ask why the Peloponnese was so unpopular or alternatively what was so special about Thessaly if you were a Neolithic Greek, one point that does need consideration is whether the difference in the number of sites has a demographic basis or reflects a contrast between a highly nucleated and a more dispersed pattern of settlement in the Peloponnese and Thessaly respectively. Survey and excavation at Kouphovouno, one site in Laconia which was occupied for much of the Neolithic period, suggest a village of 4 ha or so.⁹ It is difficult to estimate the size of the population but presumably there were several hundred inhabitants,¹⁰ not much more than the average for settlements in eastern Thessaly. Therefore, if we assume that Kouphovouno is typical of the larger settlements in the Peloponnese, which seems reasonable, there can be no doubt that there was a real north-south demographic divide in Neolithic Greece.

The obvious explanation for this would be the better agricultural land and water resources that Thessaly could offer. However, Perlès has concluded that sites in eastern Thessaly do not cluster in valleys or by water sources and there is no correlation between settlement location and particular topographic features.¹¹ She thinks that socio-economic factors were more important. Equally the type of intensive horticulture for which Halstead has argued,¹² was perfectly feasible in the Peloponnese and could have supported a much higher population density.¹³ So environmental constraints do not provide the answer and it would seem that these Peloponnesian communities must have opted for relative isolation. With a population of several hundred they were demographically viable and there would have been additional labour available when needed, as well as surplus agricultural produce in the event of a crisis.¹⁴

⁸ Mee and Cavanagh 2000; Davis 2004.

⁹ Cavanagh et al 2004, 82.

¹⁰ Mee 2001, 8.

¹¹ Perlès 1999, 48-51; 2001, 132-47, a conclusion which is maintained but modified in Johnson and Perlès 2004.

¹² Halstead 2002.

¹³ Cavanagh 2004, 167-8 and 181.

¹⁴ Mee 2001, 6-8.

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So much for ‘being Peloponnesian’ in the Neolithic period – or so you would think. But these communities were not completely isolated. Spondylus shell ornaments, like this bracelet from Kouphovouno ([FIG. 1](#)), have been found across Europe and indicate the existence of long distance exchange networks.¹⁵ The obsidian used for chipped stone tools was also imported but Perlès does not believe that it was procured directly from Melos by each community and must have been acquired through exchange, possibly from itinerant knappers.¹⁶ Because they imply shared beliefs, figurines are particularly important. Marble figurines ‘from the vicinity of Sparta’, most likely Kouphovouno, and from Aigina have almost identical proportions ([FIG. 2](#)).¹⁷ Terracotta figurines from Corinth, Franchthi, Lerna, Asea, and Kouphovouno are also very similar ([FIG. 3](#)).¹⁸ Talalay has drawn attention to terracotta legs, which had evidently been made in pairs but were designed to be split apart after they had been fired.¹⁹ She wonders whether the two halves were used as tokens to symbolise alliances between individuals or families in different communities. To her list of examples from Corinth, Nemea, Lerna, Franchthi, Asea and Akrotas, we can now add Kouphovouno ([FIG. 4](#)).

MIDDLE NEOLITHIC POTTERY

What does the pottery tell us about interaction between sites? In the Early Neolithic period pottery production was minimal, approximately 12-13 vessels per annum at Franchthi for example.²⁰ These cups and bowls were evidently used to serve food and drink, perhaps on special, ritual or ceremonial, occasions. Production increased in the Middle Neolithic period but by how much? Vitelli reckons that around 150-175 vessels were made each year at Franchthi,²¹ whereas we have proposed a much higher figure of 1875-2000 at Kouphovouno.²² Clearly there was much more pottery in circulation and our expectation is that it would now have had a wider range of uses. Although the introduction of agriculture and hence the start of the Neolithic does not always coincide with the first appearance of pottery in a given society,²³ these developments were often linked. The great advantage of pottery was that it could be used to store and cook, as well as serve food and drink, though this versatility would not have been immediately apparent. So it was probably inevitable that there should be some delay in the ‘response to

¹⁵ Willms 1985.

¹⁶ Perlès 1992, 136-7; 2001, 207-8.

¹⁷ Cavanagh et al. 2004, 53-5; Talalay 1993, 64-5.

¹⁸ Talalay 1993.

¹⁹ Talalay 1987.

²⁰ Vitelli 1989, 21.

²¹ Vitelli 1989, 21-2.

²² Mee 2007, 202.

²³ Hoopes and Barnett 1995.

potential'.²⁴ Nevertheless, it is extraordinary that, even after several centuries, most of the pottery still consisted of fine ware. In one of the Middle Neolithic contexts at Kouphovouno, the figure is 93% in terms of the number of sherds (FIG. 5) and 76% by weight (FIG. 6). We do have some cooking vessels (FIG. 7) but most of the coarse sherds in fact come from large open bowls with high pedestal bases, so there is no provision for bulk storage.²⁵

The most common Middle Neolithic shapes were jars and bowls (FIG. 8).²⁶ The collar-necked jars would have been useful for the short-term storage of dry goods. The low centre of gravity of piriform jars makes them suitable for short-term storage of liquids, though the incurved rim would have made it difficult to pour out the contents. Bowls were presumably used to serve food or drink. The everted rims on some of the bowls may have supported a lid or cover and would allow the contents to be decanted slowly. Liquid foods or some type of beverage could have been served in the deep bowls. The shallow bowls often have a high pedestal base, which makes them unstable and therefore unsuitable for liquids. This is also true of some of the carinated bowls, though they can be quite deep. It has been suggested that similar carinated vessels from Neolithic sites in the Near East were yogurt pots.²⁷ So most of the pottery was evidently used for the presentation and consumption of food and drink.

To estimate how many people could have been served from these vessels, I have calculated the capacity in litres of the 46 whole or almost complete Middle Neolithic jars and bowls illustrated by Phelps (FIG. 9). It has been reckoned that individual-sized vessels range from 6-8 cm in height (mean 7 cm) and 10-23 cm maximum diameter (mean 14 cm), family-capacity bowls from 4-23 cm in height (mean 10 cm) and 8-95 cm maximum diameter (mean 25 cm).²⁸ In terms of volume, vessels in the 0.2-0.5 l range are interpreted as cups, bowls with a capacity of 0.5-1.5 l would have served individuals and those larger than 1.5 l families.²⁹ As the break in distribution between 1.0 and 1.5 l is seen as critical, 60% of the Middle Neolithic vessels would have served families or alternatively groups of individuals.

A remarkably high proportion of the Middle Neolithic pottery was painted—65% at Kouphovouno and many more sherds must once have been decorated but have lost their surface. This attractive style with bold geometric motifs is known as Urfirnis and it is found throughout the Peloponnese.³⁰ Why was there such an emphasis on the production of high quality ceramic vessels

²⁴ Brown 1989, 205-8.

²⁵ Mee 2007, 204.

²⁶ Phelps 2004, figs. 11-20.

²⁷ Henrickson and McDonald 1983, 637-8.

²⁸ Henrickson and McDonald 1983, 632.

²⁹ Henrickson and McDonald 1983, 638-9.

³⁰ Phelps 2004, 44-5.

which were primarily used for food and drink and what does this common style tell us about interaction within and between these communities?

It would appear that most of the pottery was locally made and not exchanged.³¹ Because of the skill and technical knowledge that would have been required, Vitelli believes that there were specialist potters in each community.³² Given the level of production at Kouphovouno, we have argued that most households were involved,³³ but whoever was responsible this pottery must have represented a considerable investment of time and resources. The size of the vessels only makes sense if food and drink were shared, for example by families. But the quality of the pottery and the way that some of the shapes would have put the food on display suggest that it was also or mainly used for supra-household feasts. The fact that food was cooked both inside and outside Middle Neolithic houses implies that it was shared between neighbours,³⁴ which would have promoted community solidarity. Sometimes this commensality must have had a formal or ceremonial character, hence the fine pottery, and Halstead believes that these feasts will have served 'to mobilise additional agricultural labour, to negotiate and affirm social relationships at both an intra- and inter-settlement level, and to convert agricultural surpluses into symbolic capital in the context of social competition'.³⁵

The use of a common style of pottery across the Peloponnese with an emphasis on the consumption of food and drink is evidence of social interaction between communities and shared cultural values. Can we deduce the level of contact from the pottery? The social interaction theory hypothesises that stylistic similarities will correlate with the level of contact between individuals or groups but has been criticised as unduly simplistic.³⁶ Clearly the nature of the contact must be taken into account.³⁷ More usefully the information exchange theory stresses the role of style as a medium of communication, which can 'foster group identity, integration and boundary maintenance', at the level of the individual, the family, the community or some larger organisation.³⁸

Cullen has made a detailed analysis of the Urfirnis style– based on attributes of design structure, element choice and combination and microvariation– at five sites in the north-eastern Peloponnese.³⁹ She identifies two spheres of interaction: Franchthi-Corinth-Lerna and Lerna-Asea-Ayioryitika, though

³¹ Cullen 1985, 82.

³² Vitelli 1993, 216-17.

³³ Mee 2007, 209-10.

³⁴ Halstead 1995.

³⁵ Halstead 2004, 157, on the competitive aspect of these feasts see Dietler 2001, 76-8.

³⁶ For example by Lathrap 1983 and Hill 1985, 363-6.

³⁷ Cullen 1985, 78-9.

³⁸ Hill 1985, 366 and 383.

³⁹ Cullen 1985.

there is a considerable overlap. Symmetry analysis of Middle Neolithic pottery by Washburn also indicates two contact networks in the north-eastern Peloponnese with a similar distribution.⁴⁰ So we certainly have evidence of close interaction and it is apparent that other sites in the Peloponnese, such as Kouphovouno, were integrated in this network.

How was this distinctive pottery style transmitted? Jacobsen wonders whether transhumant pastoralists met up in the summer and traded the pottery.⁴¹ However, doubts have been expressed about the practice of transhumance in this period and, in any case, there is no evidence that pottery was regularly exchanged.⁴² More plausibly, Cullen argues that the potters were women who may have moved between communities as a consequence of the practice of exogamy.⁴³ Because of the technical sophistication of Urfirnis, imitation would be difficult and some form of direct instruction must therefore have been required. Halstead is not convinced that intermarriage would have operated on a regional scale but does believe that shared pottery styles 'indicate a significant level of social contact'.⁴⁴ What the pottery tells us is that Middle Neolithic communities in the Peloponnese did interact and there can be no doubt that a system of alliances would have been essential, with so few settlements so far apart.⁴⁵ Whatever else may have been exchanged, it seems likely that food and drink were ceremonially consumed when individuals from different sites met. These occasions will have reinforced their cultural ties and presumably their sense of a common identity, perhaps even of 'being Peloponnesian'. Did this unity last?

LATE AND FINAL NEOLITHIC POTTERY

In the Late Neolithic period Urfirnis was not used as a decorative technique at Franchthi,⁴⁶ but elsewhere, for instance at Corinth,⁴⁷ it did survive for a time. Compared with the relative uniformity of the Middle Neolithic period, we now find an 'array of ceramic stylistic traditions',⁴⁸ but this is not because communities were more isolated. It is clear that a wide network of contacts had been maintained and in fact there is more evidence of links with central and northern Greece in this period.⁴⁹ Pottery may have been exchanged more frequently, though local production is still the rule.⁵⁰

⁴⁰ Washburn 1983, 151-7.

⁴¹ Jacobsen 1984, 34-5.

⁴² Halstead 1990; 1996.

⁴³ Cullen 1985, 95-7.

⁴⁴ Halstead 1999, 78-9.

⁴⁵ Mee 2001, 5-8.

⁴⁶ Vitelli 1999, 61.

⁴⁷ Lavezzi 1978, 423; 2003, 68-9.

⁴⁸ Vitelli 1999, 2.

⁴⁹ Washburn 1983, 157-61; Vitelli 1999, 2 and 97.

⁵⁰ Vitelli 1999, 3 and 61.

Typical Late Neolithic shapes include convex, carinated and shoulder bowls,⁵¹ which would have been suitable for solids or liquids (FIG. 10). The shallow bowls on high pedestal bases were ostentatious, if not especially practical. Whatever they contained was evidently intended to be seen. Piriform and collar-necked jars were no doubt used for short-term storage. It should be noted that this range of shapes was made in a range of wares, with no strict correlation between particular shapes and particular wares.

Of the 53 whole or almost complete Late Neolithic vessels illustrated by Phelps, 75% have a capacity of 1.5 l or less (FIG. 11). If more jars had survived, the higher end of the chart would not be quite so underpopulated. Nevertheless, it is clear that most of the bowls could only hold individual rather than family-sized portions, so this is an important development in the way that pottery was utilised.

A high proportion of the pottery was still decorated, if not painted, and it is significant that the same range of wares– Black Ware, Grey Ware, Matt-Painted and Polychrome– is found at many Late Neolithic sites in the Peloponnese.⁵² There is no obvious regional variation. Vitelli concludes that ‘each of the varieties represented at Franchthi seems likely to have been made by a different set of potters’, though shapes and decorative elements were evidently copied.⁵³ Exchange may have led to the transmission of these styles between sites but does not explain why they were adopted across the region. Of course this could reflect a taste for diversity, a reaction after the uniformity of the Middle Neolithic period. Nevertheless, it is also possible that there was a symbolic dimension. Stylistic variation may have been intended to convey information about the users or uses of the pottery. As Urem-Kotsou and Kotsakis have pointed out, ‘the complexity of ceramic assemblages, particularly those involved in the consumption of food, will almost certainly reflect or represent particular sets of social relations’.⁵⁴ In the Peloponnese this would presumably have been at the intra-group level, since communities were not unduly concerned to emphasise their individuality vis-à-vis other settlements.⁵⁵ Moreover, at Kouphovouno there is no evidence that different households favoured particular ware types, since they are found together. Consequently we should perhaps look at divisions within households– male: female, adult: child. Alternatively there may have been notions about what was appropriate on particular occasions.

In many parts of the Peloponnese there is an increase in the number of settlements in the Final Neolithic period.⁵⁶ Most of the pottery is awful,

⁵¹ Phelps 2004, figs. 25-45.

⁵² Phelps 2004, 65-6.

⁵³ Vitelli 1999, 98.

⁵⁴ Urem-Kotsou and Kotsakis 2007, 226.

⁵⁵ Hill 1985, 368-9.

⁵⁶ Mee 2001, 3-4.

‘coarse, poorly fired, easily scratched and broken’ to quote Vitelli.⁵⁷ The potters avoided complex shapes (FIG. 12).⁵⁸ There is a variety of bowls, which could loosely be classified as convex, carinated or deep, and more storage vessels were in use, collar-necked jars and pithoi. The capacity of these vessels covers a much broader spectrum than before, with fewer at the lower end of the range. Bowls with a capacity of 1.5 l or more were presumably made for families or communal use. Bulk storage resulted in the production of some sizeable jars and pithoi which could hold 30 l.

Finer pottery with incised, crusted or pattern-burnished decoration has a restricted distribution. It is found in the north-eastern Peloponnese and at a few other sites,⁵⁹ but not in Laconia at Kouphovouno or Alepotrypa. A monochrome finish is more common, though this is rather a misnomer since the colour often varies. Dark tones – reds, browns and blacks – predominate. Plastic decoration, in the form of impressed, incised or plain cordons, is a regular feature and concealed some of the imperfections that potters made when they formed large vessels.⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

As Vitelli has pointed out, what we see in the Final Neolithic period is ‘household production for household consumption’.⁶¹ Pottery did not have the same symbolic importance any more and perhaps this was because there were more settlements in closer contact with less need to find a common cultural mode of communication. However, in the Early Bronze Age pottery production became more specialised and the distribution of vessel types associated with the consumption of food and drink, in particular the sauceboat, once again indicates the existence of supra-regional social alliances.⁶²

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⁵⁷ Vitelli 1999, 64.

⁵⁸ Phelps 2004, figs. 47-59.

⁵⁹ Phelps 2004, 106-7 and 110.

⁶⁰ Vitelli 1999, 92.

⁶¹ Vitelli 1995, 58.

⁶² Mee forthcoming.

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