

THE QUESTION OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN NEOLITHIC ANATOLIAN COMMUNITIES

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Despite the wealth of archaeological material from prehistoric excavations in Turkey, reconstruction of the social structure or economic organization of early sedentary communities remains extremely speculative. There is no doubt that settlement patterns and subsistence strategies of most Neolithic groups can be studied and explained through their artifactual assemblages and non-artifactual residues respectively in their individual palaeoenvironments. However, the investigation of the social aspects requires a broader approach making use also of ethnography with the understanding that it should be limited to the tentative reconstruction of past socio-economic models which might have existed since the Neolithic or Early Chalcolithic period.

Hunter-gatherer communities in Anatolia started to create small villages even before the tenth millennium BP. It is a fairly well-documented fact that these early prehistoric villages were established in areas within the mild Mediterranean climatic belt of southern, south-central and southeastern Turkey, or in their proximity, which had a dry-farming potential. However, the emergence of these villages, often assumed to be perennial, does not necessarily suggest that the subsistence strategies of their communities changed to farming immediately or drastically as soon as they adopted a less mobile way of life. In other words, the transition from a traditional Epi-Palaeolithic subsistence based on hunting and collecting to efficient food production centered on cereal agriculture and intensive animal husbandry followed its own pace of development which in most cases seems to have been rather slow. In the early phases of sedentarism, when farming was still in its incipient stages, Neolithic communities would have required no more than a slight restructuring of their social organization which was traditionally oriented to meet the basic requirements of a hunting and collecting economy. Therefore, we may postulate that more complex societies emerged at a time when agriculture and animal husbandry played a far more dominant role in the subsistence economies of village communities.

It is important to emphasize that not all prehistoric villages excavated in Turkey have long records of human occupation. While some may have been inhabited for five or six centuries, and at times up to a millennium (e.g. Çatalhöyük, Kuruçay), others seem to have been abandoned after occupations of much shorter duration (e.g. Suberde, Höyücek, Koşk Höyük, etc.).¹

Relatively short occupation of sites could be generally explained as resulting from a failure in the long-term sustenance of the delicate balance between a community's size and its subsistence requirements. For instance, an imbalance between mortality and birth rates

¹For more details on these and other Neolithic and Early Chalcolithic sites see Yakar 1991; 1994.

preventing a steady natural growth of small sedentary communities would have adversely affected their subsistence strategies as well. Such numerically decreasing groups would have logically tried to survive by experimenting with different social and/or economic models. While one of the options would have been to be incorporated within a more successful group, other options could have involved a shift to a different, perhaps more mobile, subsistence strategy. Either way such experimentation could have resulted in the shifting of site-locations within the same natural habitat or to a different one. In regional and sub-regional site distribution and density records such shifts may often give the impression, especially when taking place within the time-frame of a century or two, of a population increase.²

The size and plans of most Neolithic settlements may reflect to some extent the socio-economic organization of their respective communities. Assuming that similar natural environments were probably exploited in similar ways, it is possible to hypothesize that the economic activities of contemporary Neolithic communities living in similar habitats and maintaining similar subsistence strategies would have eventually resulted in the creation of similar social structures. Having said this, it is equally logical to assume that certain factors not directly related to the organization of the subsistence economy could have caused archaeologically undetectable variations or stratification in the social structures of these communities. Despite the fact that most excavations of prehistoric sites in Turkey have produced a large assortment of data pertinent to the study of agriculture and animal husbandry, there are still many unanswered questions concerning the structure of mixed farming communities, in particular on the central Anatolian plateau. The structure of each community would have depended on the nature of settlement. When dealing with this question we usually assume that villages were inhabited throughout the year. So far, however, none of the excavated Neolithic sites where animal husbandry has been attested revealed discernable evidence for roofed shelters within the settlement. It is true that a number of villages such as Neolithic Kuruçay or Early Chalcolithic Hacilar were surrounded by walls which may have had the purpose, among other objectives, of keeping the village livestock fenced in. The problem is that in the harsh winters of the central plateau, livestock would not have survived the winter months in open pens. Unless animal shelters were constructed on the periphery of villages or we are seriously mistaken in their correct identification in the architectural record, the existence of some form of transhumance cannot be ruled out during the Late Neolithic/Early Chalcolithic period when animal husbandry is well attested in Anatolia. Transhumance could have been practiced not only by sedentary groups as part of an economic strategy aiming of feeding the herds in regions with much milder temperatures, but by village communities exploiting secondary habitats for seasonal hunting and food-collecting activities. One could rightly argue that fully sedentary Neolithic communities may have included semi-nomadic components who carried out the herding and hunting activities for the whole village. In such cases some segments of the community may have been practiced transhumance. Such internal division of labor would have required an organization actually more complex than that which the archaeological record usually suggests.

The permanent nature of occupation in a prehistoric village is usually established

²In archaeological fields surveys dealing with prehistoric sites with short occupational histories, the surface assemblages do not show clear typological differentiation over a century or two. In other words, abandoned villages immediately recreated at a different site within the same natural niche would indicate the presence of two sites when in fact only one of them was actually settled.

according to the presence of certain constructional components in the architecture and the character of artifactual and non-artifactual assemblages in the material record. For instance, in regions with continental winters, villages with solid thick-walled houses which have partitioned living spaces, indoor heating and food-processing installations, storage facilities and intramural burials are deemed to be permanent settlements. Refuse deposits containing a wide range of flint and stone tools or paleobotanical and paleozoological remains pointing to year-round subsistence activity are also indicators of permanency of human occupation. Having said this, we timidly assume that prehistoric sites having rather flimsy architecture or that houses devoid of storage facilities or solid heating installations are to be considered as seasonal settlements. The confirmation for the existence of such settlements should be further corroborated by the size of the of the artifactual and non-artifactual assemblages found in them. For instance, a limited range of domesticated animal bones and food plants and the relative lack of iconographic material or repertoires of pottery, bone, stone and lithic tools restricted to a few basic forms are usually construed as characteristic of sites occupied seasonally.

Palaeozoological and palaeobotanical remains pertinent to the subsistence economy in certain Aceramic Neolithic settlements such as Aşıklı Çöyük or Çayönü indicate greater emphasis on hunting or trapping of wild species than preoccupation with animal husbandry and cereal agriculture. In such instances the question is how could one differentiate between seasonal settlements and economically specialized permanent villages? To answer this is almost impossible. If we compare two of the relatively well excavated pre-pottery Neolithic villages such as Çayönü in southeastern Turkey and Aşıklı Höyük in the south-central plateau, we are immediately struck by the fundamental difference in their settlement plans. The free-standing buildings at Çayönü, both during the 'round-house' phase and the 'grill-plan' phase, naturally give us the impression that the community there was organized differently from that of Aşıklı Höyük who lived in an agglutinated settlement with closely packed houses. Both communities maintained a subsistence strategy based on selective hunting and gathering. In both cases cultivation of cereals or animal husbandry were clearly not the principal economic activities pursued by the communities in question. However, the fact that at Çayönü the round huts with their limited enclosed spaces, barely enough for nuclear family units, were replaced by much larger rectangular 'grill-plan' houses, each capable of accommodating a larger family unit under its roof, requires an explanation. Obviously the new type of accommodations would not have been possible without improved building technology. Beyond that, this architectural transformation may well reflect the need at Çayönü and other contemporary sites in the southeast to provide larger accommodations, perhaps for extended family units to live under a single roof. If this assumption is correct, then we can propose that such extended family units started to emerge even before the adoption of farming as the basic subsistence strategy. Later, when such activities are observed in the archaeological, zoological and botanical records at Çayönü during the 'cell-plan' phase, the free-standing houses suggest that the family structure of this village community did not change much. Structural changes observed in the 'cell-plan' houses, which were provided with ample storage space, were designed to meet the demands of a subsistence economy laying greater stress on farming.

Although the villages of Aşıklı Höyük and Can Hasan III were abandoned during the Aceramic Neolithic period, their agglutinated plans survived in the Pottery Neolithic period in the south-central plateau. At Çatal höyük, whose earliest levels may be partly contemporary with Aşıklı Höyük, this village plan continues despite the fact that its economy in the second

part of the seventh millennium B.C. was far more advanced than that recorded at the latter site. In fact, agglutinated village plans partly survived in the south-central plateau into the Early Chalcolithic period (e.g., Can Hasan I, Level 2) when farming economies were quite well developed. If we assume that agglutinated plans in prehistoric villages could also be interpreted as an indication of the existence of societies which were close-knit but not necessarily kin-related since the Aceramic Neolithic period, then we may postulate that these were virtually unaffected by the transition to more intensive farming economies.

The presence of storage facilities such as clay bins, silos and pits in Neolithic villages is one of the clearest indications of the intensity of cereal agriculture in the subsistence economy. The importance of this component in mixed farming can be relatively measured by the capacity of storage installations in villages, for instance their total volume in each house or in open courtyards between them (e.g., Bademağacı, Hacilar I). Storage capacity in turn could indicate, among other things, either the existence of large households or surplus production for feeding other community members in accordance with labor division norms.

It is certain that large and successful Neolithic groups too could not have maintained their social organization indefinitely if their numbers increased constantly in a natural habitat with a limited carrying capacity. Environmental pressures no doubt would have resulted in the formation of small hamlets in order to solve demographic and territorial congestion which affected village economies negatively. The increase in the density of settlements during the late sixth/early fifth millennium BC, must have been the consequence of such socio-economic re-organization in order to exploit the potential of the natural habitats fully. Maintaining socio-economic unity following such unavoidable fragmentation and settlement dispersions would have no doubt required a broader organizational mechanism based perhaps on some form of settlement hierarchy and/or a stratified social structure.

Summing up, we may assume without much hesitation that Neolithic communities, regardless of their individual subsistence modes, required a minimum level of social organization to survive as independent groups. With the high mortality rate recorded at most Neolithic sites in Anatolia, nuclear families would have experienced difficulties in assuring their future generations. In a nuclear family the death of infants and young children would not have been as dramatic as in the case of the demise of a parent or both parents. Ethnographic examples from Anatolian rural communities indicate that the problem of high mortality among infants and young children in nuclear families is solved by a constantly pregnant wife. In cases of death during childbirth or infertility, the husband takes another wife to ensure the social and economic future of his family. However, the fate of a nuclear family is doomed by the premature demise of the father. The surviving wife with young children, or in worse cases young orphans, have to take refuge with kin, often at the expense of losing their economic independence and social status.

It is important to remember that health-related problems affected the growth of the rural population in the remote parts of Turkey at least until the late 1940s while the State was still unable to provide adequate medical services to rural communities. Indeed ethnographic examples are useful for understanding the growth-related demographic problems faced by Neolithic and Chalcolithic communities in Anatolia. One such example illustrating the small growth rate in a deep-rooted central Anatolian farming community is the Hasanoğlu village in the Elmadağ district of Ankara. According to the census carried out for the first time in the

sixteenth century by the Ottoman administration, Hasanoğlu was a farming village made up of up to 36 households numbering some 180 people. By the mid-1940s the village had a population of 1403 inhabitants organized in 267 households with two fifths of the entire population being under the age of 15. In other words, in 400 years the village grew only 7-8 times its original size.³ With such a slow internal growth rate the village managed to survive mainly because the villagers maintained extended family frameworks providing a socio-economic mode based on common production and consumption.

The village of Siyetli in the province of Manisa provides a further example of a slow annual growth rate (ca. 0.25-0.35%) in relatively small and isolated farming communities in Anatolia. In the census of 1935, the village had 445 inhabitants: 201 males and 244 females. By 1942 the community grew to 454 people, in other words by nine people in seven years.⁴

There can be no doubt that Neolithic societies devised various social mechanisms in order to cope with communities and families decreasing in size and numbers. The basic mechanism would have required a community structure with a strong emphasis on kin-related framework (e.g., extended-family/clan) with an internal social division by age and sex groups. A hypothetical organization according to age groups would have naturally granted elevated social status to members of the second generations as organizational leaders, activity leaders, and to members of the third generation as spiritual leaders and so on. The problem is that Neolithic records in Anatolia do not always confirm the existence of presumed ranked societies which had been suggested for Çayönü at least during the 'cell-plan' phase, if not earlier. The cell-plan houses in the western part of this Aceramic Neolithic village are smaller than those in the eastern part of the village. The latter are located near the large special activity buildings. It is true that at most sites it is possible to differentiate between village houses and unusually large structures whose plans and internal divisions differ from the habitation units, as in the case of Çayönü. However, the main problem is to deduce whether all of these large and elaborate buildings were designed for cult rituals or for other communal activities. Could it be that some were inhabited by the village leadership? The same question arises when dealing with burials of unusual form and tomb contents.

The slow growth of Neolithic and Chalcolithic village communities in Anatolia raises the question of explaining the sudden growth of villages such as Çayönü from its 'round-house' phase to the 'grill plan' phase. As already indicated, not only did the plans of houses change, which could be explained by the result of advanced building techniques, but also the size of the individual houses grew considerably. The natural growth rate of the village would hardly have resulted in such a change within such a short period of time. The same can be said for Neolithic Çatalhöyük. If it indeed grew from a small nucleus to a large settlement of thousands of occupants within a few centuries, as has been often maintained, then this could

³A survey carried out in 1944 at the cemetery outside the village indicated that between 1927 to 1944 in ca. 17 years 402 children out of a total of 1002 in the 1-5 age group had died. In other words two out of every five children did not make it to adulthood. For more details see Yasa 1955.

⁴Of the 238 females in 1942 one third were within the age group of reproduction (17-40). Of these 10% could not have children due to problems of fertility. Half the women in this age group had lost some of their children during or soon after giving birth. In this village barely 3% of the population fell in the age group of 60-70+. In seven years the number of deaths among young children and adolescents was 141. Of these half were infants under the age of one year, 16% between 1-2 years, 18% between 3-6 years and 7% between 7-19 years. For more details see Boran 1945.

have hardly been the result of slow internal growth. The transition from the small Hacilar II village to the much larger Hacilar I settlement too could not have been the result of internal population expansion, but rather one which must have involved external groups.

As already suggested, demographic problems faced by prehistoric societies raise the possibility that tribal organizations may have emerged in Anatolia soon after farming became the principal mode of subsistence, if not earlier. In theory, tribal structures in the distant past could have emerged as a result of continuous socio-economic interaction between small communities sharing certain ethno-cultural affinities and living as neighbors in the same general territory. The merging of small communities into tribal-like structures would have strengthened their position in the competition for territories against rival groups. The existence of such organizations beyond the hypothetical extended family structures would certainly have solved some of the problems faced by settled communities unable to sustain a safe rate of growth of 1% a year. Unfortunately archaeological records do not help us clarify this issue which remains hypothetical but continues to preoccupy prehistorians since it relates to conditions of socio-economic survival of pre-state sedentary and pastoral communities.

In this context we should consider the possibility that certain ceremonial sites identified as such by their particular locations and iconographic assemblages may have played some role in strengthening the social bonds within the wider social organizations. After all, artistic expressions in different types of art form can be explained as systems of symbols explaining spiritual beliefs or even at times symbolizing events. It is true that in most cases the line dividing a symbol from the object or concept it represents cannot be seen or understood. By the Aceramic Neolithic period most Anatolian village communities had inherited the knowledge of previously established systems of meaning and symbols. They therefore possessed a rich iconographic repertory which they no doubt used not only to define the natural events affecting their physical and spiritual world, but also to express their group identity or even tribal territory.⁵

Finally, the centuries-long survival of some Neolithic communities leaves no doubt that the socio-economic organizations they maintained worked well.

⁵For instance, the large stone sculptures recovered in the recent excavations at Göbekli Tepe and other locations in the southeast bear a strong resemblance to those found at Novali Çori located at quite a distance from the first site mentioned here. Such a distribution pattern of such easily visible monumental cultic installations and monuments (e.g., Göbekli Tepe) may have been more than just a proud manifestation of cultural and technological superiority. It is possible to hypothesize that these could have also served to define the territory of a strong and highly accomplished Aceramic Neolithic group perhaps maintaining an archaic form of priestly-society.

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