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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

"History Making" and the Problem of Religion in the Neolithic

Review by Mattia Cartolano

Religion, History, and Place in the Origin of Settled Life

By Ian Hodder

University Press of Colorado, 2018

Religion, History, and Place in the Origin of Settled Life is a new episode of the Templeton saga led by Ian Hodder and is about the concept of “history-making”. This volume follows previous work on the nine-thousand-year old town, Çatalhöyük, supported by the John Templeton Foundation, in particular, another publication titled *Religion in the emergence of civilization* (2010) when Hodder and Pels introduced the idea of “history houses.” Here again, a team of specialists tries to unveil the spirituality and possible religious beliefs of early farming communities, who practiced ritual ceremonies and constructed special buildings that have constituted the fundamental cultural framework of their new sedentary life. The leitmotif of this book goes around the continuous endeavors of Neolithic populations to make connections with the ancient past, in other words, to establish a history line that strengthens affiliation and commitment to a place and a group identity. This idea is supported by a series of archaeological examples, such as the repetitive construction of buildings on the same location, in-house burial practices, circulation of plastered skulls and reuse of older architectural features that are frequently present in the Neolithic world.

This book is constituted by ten papers, including Hodder’s introductory chapter, that generally focuses on some aspects and archaeological examples in which the idea of “history-making” is traceable. Most of the contributors are well-known experts in the Neolithic in Southwest Asia who have worked in important Neolithic sites and have a thorough understanding of the archaeological data under discussion, which gives strength to the arguments of this volume. In the introduction, Hodder presents two types or scales of “history-making”: one that concerns the public attention and the other one that regards a more restricted, and private sphere. This interesting distinction offers the opportunity for a

productive debate on the private-public social differentiations that are visible among the Pre-Pottery Neolithic communities as of the 9th Millennium BC. In this regard, first Hodder and then Lecari in last chapter propose an interactive approach to the research issues through the 3D reconstruction of Çatalhöyük “shrines” that would allow users to perceive the archaeological contexts under a different light and provide alternative interpretations of the data, which might not be visible through the traditional bi-dimensional picture.

This digital approach is also suggested in Chapter 1 by Schults and Widman who tried to simulate religious entanglement at Çatalhöyük. The computer-based system is grounded on the amount (low/high) social investment that is determined by a complex system of variables, to which some are taken from experimental studies on contemporary societies (e.g., delay of gratification) that, I think, it might not appropriately reflect Neolithic lifeway and decision making. A large part of this paper is dedicated to explain the model and to run the computer simulation along with a series of speculative assumptions (the entanglement theory in primis) that substantially limit and constrain the results of this work, as recognized by the authors in the conclusion.

Chapter 2 examines the relationships between the emergence of settle life in the central Zagros (Iran and Iraq) and the one at Çatalhöyük. Here, Wendy Matthews’ presents a micro-stratigraphic and micromorphological analysis of deposits, profiles and residues. She argues that ritual activity in the Zagros was much more intense than previously thought and, similarly to what happens in other regions of the Near East, the communities of Bestansur and at Sheikh-e Abad manifest a comparable behavior of “history-making” with regard to burial practices and the use of public structures. Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen in chapter 3 highlight the millenary ritual traditions of Epipaleolithic and Neolithic societies in South Levant. They rightly argue that evidence of “history-making” appears well before the establishment of a delayed-return economy. Already with the Kebaran and, more predominantly, with the Natufians, attempts in establishing a strong communal affiliation through the cult of ancestor and territorial attachment (e.g., living and returning to the same campsite). The two Israeli archaeologists suggest the idea of ‘security blanket’ (p.108) which stands for the continuous attempt of early Holocene individuals to connect with the past as a form of psychological need to cope with new life changes.

The extraordinary enclosures at Göbekli Tepe have puzzled many researchers and it is still unclear whether the engravings on the T-shaped pillars represent links with former ancestors or they tell instead a mythical a temporal story. What Lee Clare and his colleagues propose in chapter 4 is to examine the life cycle of the enclosures mentioned above. The construction, management, and burial of such monumental structures suggest an intentional legitimization of the property and political power of

the elites, which must have been strengthened by an historical backup.

Strong commitment to a place and social memory is manifested in other archeological contexts, such as Körtektepe and Aşıklı (chapters 5-7). Circulation of stone vessel fragments, standardization of platelet motifs and rich burial practices are the main arguments that Benz and colleagues use for criticizing Hayden's theory that intensification of food production and accumulation is led by 'power-hungry aggrandizers' (p.137). Whereas Anspach in chapter 7 is convinced that hearths have played a vital role in the development of ritual life. More than representing a simple domestic feature, Duru (excellent review of the concept of Neolithization on p.164s) highlights the increasing division between private and public sphere from the early to the late phases of occupation at Aşıklı that fostered the phenomenon of alienation and privatization in the Neolithic house life.

The last chapters of this book is a return to Çatalhöyük context. By borrowing from Lévi-Strauss the concept of "house society," Joyce (chapter 8) raises the issue of property in circumstances where "history-making" attempts also imply a sense of ownership to land, a house, animals, etc. As manifested in some ethnographic examples, house property is not only determined by material estate but also significantly supported by its immaterial aspects such as names, styles, and titles. Techniques of pottery production at Çatalhöyük could represent this immaterial form of distinguishing group affiliation. In chapter 9, Christine Tsoraki instead looks at unusual cluster of ground stones in Çatalhöyük building 77. The analysis suggests that fragments of worked stones have been deliberately deposited as part of a ritual related to building abandonment. Knowing that ground stones have been important not only for food processing but also for manufacturing other tools and ornaments, it is suggested here that the practices of depositing a ground stone might be a sodality-based form of ritual/history making practices.

Religion, History, and Place in the Origin of Settled Life is a good book for engaging a discussion about Religion, History, and Ritual in the early sedentary communities of Southwest Asia. Nevertheless, the question of Religion in the Neolithic is still unsolved and probably will never be thoroughly answered. Some of the authors (e.g., Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen) have not even mentioned the word Religion in their papers. As Marion Benz aptly pointed out (p.138), the term Religion implies a broader discussion of a series of prerequisites and other concepts, such as dogma and authority, which also diverge from the archaeological themes discussed here. Probably the concept of Religion is not yet ready to be adequately included in the Neolithic narratives. We hope that in the next episode Hodder and colleagues will focus on other aspects (e.g., consciousness) more closely related to religious practices.

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