Neolithisation in southwest Asia – the path to modernity

Trevor Watkins
University of Edinburgh

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Abstract

Two questions are discussed that turn out to be related. The first was posed originally by Robert Braidwood more than fifty years ago, and concerns why farming was adopted in southwest Asia early in the Neolithic, and not earlier. The second concerns the usually opposed processualist and post-processualist approaches to the Neolithic. The paper seeks to model the processes at work through the Epi-palaeolithic and early Neolithic, showing how the trend towards sedentism and storage of food resources coincided with the emergence of fully symbolic cognitive and cultural faculties. The former fed more mouths, and led to the adoption of farming practices that further intensified food productivity. The latter made possible and desirable the symbolic construction of large, permanently co-resident communities. The spread of farming may then be understood as the expansion of a complex way of life that involved communities living together in larger groups, with denser, richer cultural environments, controlling not only the built environment of their own settlements, but also the productivity of the agricultural environments that surrounded them.
According to modern experimental work, the process of plant domestication was a rapid event that occurred as a result of human selection for morphologically domesticated species (19, 20). However, recent archaeobotanical data have demonstrated that before the establishment of domesticated plants in southwest Asia there was a period of cultivation of morphologically wild plants (7–10, 21). We hypothesize that these socio-cultural and economic differences between PPN sites in southwest Asia are reflected in the plant-based subsistence, as already shown by some authors (14, 32, 51–53), and could have influenced the development of plant cultivation and domestication in southwest Asia. South and Southwest Asians used the monsoon seasonal-reversal wind route from Arabia and India to travel to Southeast Asia (Barton 46). SEA is home to several ancient civilizations, including the Angkor and the Sri Vijaya kingdoms. At about 1300, there were two major kingdoms: the Sukhotai in Mainland SEA and the Majapahit empire in insular SEA. During the 12th to the 14th centuries, there was an active spice trade in the region (Fodor 67–8). Hence, Southeast Asia was exposed to different civilizations, cultures and religions for thousands of years now: animism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism,