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In this truly monumental work, barely contained by its binding, Valeska Becker provides the first German-language overview on the Early Neolithic of Italy. Indeed, as the author explains in her introduction, even synthetic studies written in Italian are rare and relatively short. The Neolithic material (or, at least, its archaeological designations) is regionally so varied, and the state of excavation and further research so diverse, that few have attempted the task. There are pockets of well-known and widely quoted research around specific fieldwork projects and issues (e.g. the enclosures on the Tavoliere plain or cave sanctuaries), but for an outsider, it has remained frustratingly difficult to gain an impression of wider processes and larger-scale patterning. In this sense, Becker's volume is a life-saver, closing the gap between bird's eye overviews on the one hand, and the mass of detailed reports on the other. The extensive bibliography alone (a whopping 42 pages) is an amazing resource, and the individual chapters provide plenty of thick description on anything from settlement, economy, burials, figurines, pottery, stone tools and more for the period between roughly 6000 and 4500 BC across all over modern-day Italy. If you are stuck having to write an essay (or indeed your introductory lecture), you need look no further! Copiously illustrated throughout with maps, photos, drawings, plates and diagrams, Becker will guide you safely through the thickets of terminological uncertainty and the vagaries of dodgy dating.

But this is more than just a descriptive text. As outlined in the introduction, the in-depth presentation of the evidence is a necessary basis for addressing specific research questions. One is where Italy sits in our models of streams of Neolithisation. Most of us (as she rightly points out) are happy to oppose a Balkan and a Mediterranean wave of colonists but are rather less comfortable with characterising the interactions between these phenomena. Italy, with its large north-south extent, is one of the areas where this problem can be tackled. As a consequence, Becker goes to some lengths to investigate the Italian material in relation to that of adjacent areas with which there may have been contacts and mutual influencing, drawing comparisons amongst others with the Starčevo and Linear-

bandkeramik (LBK) cultures, but also with assemblages from France, Greece and the Near East. This is a theme particularly for Neolithisation itself but is maintained for later periods. In addition, Becker defines two further foci for her volume: Neolithic beliefs (as evidenced in burials, figurines, deposits and cave sanctuaries), as well as questions of economy and communication patterns. To set the scene, the introduction provides short summaries of Italy's landscapes and the climatic background, as well as a research history focused in particular on the links between German and Italian research.

The remainder of the volume falls into two main parts. One chapter is concerned with the first phase of the Early Neolithic (ENL I, i.e. the Impresso wares of southern and central Italy), up to around 5500/5300 BC, while the Early Neolithic II (up to 4800/4500 BC in all regions of the peninsula) sees much more in-depth treatment over a series of thematic chapters. Throughout, Becker is to be commended for the structured way in which material is ordered and described. For example, for the ENL I, each of the culture groupings suggested in the literature is first examined in terms of its spatial distribution, then there is a brief research history, and this is followed by very pared-down descriptions of settlements and architecture, material culture (including pottery, as well as stone and bone tools and ornaments), graves and ritual, and finally dating. These sections are particularly useful, as existing dates and models are collated from the literature, critically appraised, and then modelled again in simple Bayesian frameworks. Although in many cases, this mostly shows the existing gaps in information, it also often succeeds in identifying potential overlaps between cultural phenomena, as well as examples where cultural change was apparently rather fast. Overall, the handbook-like structure of this chapter makes it easy to collect specific pieces of information across regions, but seems meant for "dipping in", rather than reading the whole text.

The synthesis in later parts of the chapter then makes some perceptive and valuable points. Neolithisation debates still struggle from a lack of knowledge of the Late Mesolithic occupation, particularly in southern areas of Italy. Nevertheless, based on material culture characteristics, the existing (and still somewhat limited) aDNA work and general recent trends in research, Becker favours a colonisation scenario for the Italian case. Yet rather than a simple model of linear spatial expansion, close typological study, mainly of the pottery, suggests that Anatolia (and not the Levant) is a more likely origin point, in contrast to – for exam-

ple – Greece. In a very informative section, Becker also provides an in-depth comparison of the Italian material with North African assemblages but finds that direct contacts are unlikely in this phase. After its initial establishment in Sicily and the south-eastern Italian mainland, the Neolithic then spreads rapidly, with the Tyrrhenian coast much more quickly colonised than the Adriatic. In this way, the comprehensive and highly detailed appreciation of the known material from southern Italy has allowed Becker to propose some very interesting patterns that now can be followed up by more directed studies.

The ENL II is even more thoroughly introduced. Over almost 120 pages, Becker offers extensive summaries for all named regional groups, from south to north, covering more or less the same general topics as for the ENL I (research history, settlement, burial and cave use, material culture, absolute dates and so on). Again, this is not an easy read for those who are not looking for specific information already – perhaps a bit more of a hint as to the patterns that will eventually be revealed, and a corresponding structure, would have helped the more casual reader. But in terms of an almost encyclopaedic summary, this section is very useful. Its upshot is a brief discussion on what models of interaction can be reconstructed on this basis. Becker gives a brief and selective nod to the controversy surrounding archaeological “cultures”, before deciding in favour of a practice-centred approach – which, however, is characterised as extremely difficult to achieve in a prehistoric setting (p. 210). She also gives a first indication of a north-south division in the material, with incised pottery and hardly any burials in northern Italy, and impressed decoration and more burials in the south.

The Fiorano group of the northern edge of the Apennines and the Po plain is then chosen as an in-depth case study, as it is here that there is a potential “second Neolithisation” scenario. The Fiorano culture seems to be a kind of gatekeeper community, the area where the southern traditions of the Neolithic package are either radically transformed, or where one must look for other predecessors from beyond Italy. In order to disentangle the possible lines of influence from the Balkans and southern Italy, Becker provides a statistical analysis of Fiorano pottery, its shapes and decorative motifs. The method is very much in keeping with how for instance LBK pottery is analysed, but has not previously been attempted for Fiorano. While it is only partly successful in defining strict chronological phases here, Becker can show that there are virtually no Impressa influences on Fiorano pottery,

and that the sometimes suggested LBK parallels are rather indirect. Similarly, there are no particularly close correspondences to phenomena such as Danilo, Starčevo and Sopot, even though contacts with these places are attested. Also, across all these regions there is a marked horizon of change around 5600/5500 cal BC. This is a well-known date for instance in LBK research, but it is exciting to see Italy added into this mix of wider cultural change. It does Becker credit to bring this inter-regional view to the debate, even though no potential reasons or mechanisms for this inter-regional pattern are suggested here. However, Becker argues that the Fiorano culture may have its origins partly in Starčevo, an idea that has not been very popular lately, but that appears perfectly plausible on this basis and opens the door to further investigation on how the Fiorano culture’s diversification from this source area may have worked, and whether this reflects a social process such as ethnogenesis.

Another topic clearly dear to Becker’s heart (as evidenced in her monumental and much quoted PhD thesis: BECKER, 2011) are the anthropomorphic figurines and vessels, burials and deposits collected in the chapter on Glaubenswelten, or “worlds of belief”. Again, this chapter is backed by a comprehensive catalogue of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic art, as well as burials, generously illustrated with plates. This is an amazing starting point for anyone wishing to take the topic further, as indeed this is one of the sections in which Becker leaves plenty of opportunities for more concerted interpretation by others. Perhaps this is because belief and ritual are defined from the start, and without much critical discussion, as relatively conservative and as not consciously used in defining identity groups (p. 268). Yet the material she presents accords only partially with this assessment. Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic depictions are rare, generally fragmented and relatively standardised in terms of body types and positions. Overall, the material fits in the general trend of a Balkan-inspired pictorial canon, but there are no particularly clear parallels to any one tradition. Although this material was evidently not common in everyday life, it was therefore to an extent adapted to local needs – as perhaps shown much more clearly in the potential re-use of a Palaeolithic figurine at La Marmotta or the Mesolithic-inspired bone figures of the Gaban group, and in the variety of less formalised expressions, such as applied elements or incised figures (all discussed in the text). While limited, this experimentation sits uneasily with Becker’s expectation of a straightforward ritual conservatism. Similarly, concerning burials, it is

evident that their overall numbers per site, but also the treatments that were accorded the deceased (inhumation, cremation, use of stone settings, use of caves or settlements, skull removal and skull burials, multiple interments), actually vary quite widely, in spite of the almost universal paucity of grave goods. Although the main rite clearly was archaeologically invisible, there appears to have been creativity and experimentation here, broadly in line with what is known from contemporary cultures in the Balkans or from the earliest LBK. It is interesting that cemeteries only develop relatively late in the Italian sequence (with the Vasi a Bocca Quadrata, and hence beyond the chronological scope of this volume). A brief summary of water cults and possible initiation rites in cave settings rounds off this chapter. Again, the evidence has been presented in an exemplary fashion, but I wonder whether a bit more engagement with the social processes behind this diversity could have resulted in a fuller reading. For example, one could have made use of Whitehouse's (2002; see also ATKINSON & WHITEHOUSE, 2011) in itself rather simple scheme of doctrinal versus imaginistic modes of religiosity (loosely modelled on Fredrik Barth's 1987 work) to investigate what role secrecy and repetition played in ritual traditions, and how this impacted degrees of diversification. In addition, this could have dovetailed with power structures, in that burial may have functioned as a levelling mechanism. At the very least, the potential for expressing status differences through mortuary rites was evidently not realised, an interesting contrast to other Neolithic societies.

Somewhat shorter, but still highly informative sections then treat ditched enclosures and economic networks. Regarding the former, Becker points to the enormous number of known examples, particularly C-shaped enclosures in parts of southern Italy, and attempts to quantify the amount of time it would have taken to construct them in order to arrive at an estimate for local population size. Although a good idea in principle, the attempt is marred by several important caveats, also acknowledged by the author herself: there are few reliable estimates on how long different tasks take (though for a recent and discussion, see HAACK, 2016), and the construction biography of many sites is uncertain, so that it is not clear how much labour was needed at any one point in time. In addition, further questionable assumptions are made (e.g. people from outside a settlement did not help in building its enclosure, "children" and "the old" could not provide any assistance, and so on; p. 420). The different calculation methods attempted by Beck-

er also lead to rather divergent results, so there is evidently some way to go before enclosure numbers and sizes can be used to calculate population densities. Much more interesting is the decrease in site numbers over time, and Becker's discussion on whether this implies nucleation or a drop in the number of inhabitants. Throughout, parallels are drawn to how enclosures are interpreted in an LBK context, but one wonders whether a somewhat wider lens, for example a glance at "work feasts" as an ethnographic phenomenon (e.g. ADAMS, 2004) and debates in other traditions with larger enclosure numbers (e.g. the TRB or Michelsberg), may have been of more help here.

The final chapter on economic networks makes for some cracking reading, as the distribution mechanisms of various kinds of raw material (most of them potentially "prestige goods" or at least exotic commodities) are detailed and compared. Becker's question, sensibly enough, is which social actors (individuals, households, or larger groups) drove these exchanges and how they may have fitted in with social status and general social processes. Yet again, however, the gripping and expert presentation of the material sits somewhat uneasily with its theoretical framework. For example, in her lengthy introduction to what economic archaeology is, Becker makes the puzzling claim that Anglophone archaeology has generally focused on subsistence exchange (p. 437), but leaves out both discussions on prestige goods networks and also more recent treatises on value, inalienable possessions and commodities which draw on a wide range of ethnographic works (e.g. GREGORY, 1982; HELMS, 1988; MAUSS, 1954; WEINER, 1992). Instead, she starts with Maslow's (1970) much-quoted, but also much-critiqued idea that all humans have basic needs such as food and shelter which have to be satisfied before others (such as expressing identity) become relevant. This then hardly influences the remainder of the chapter. Similarly, the definitions of key terms do little to direct the discussion, as indeed it turns out that in one way or another, almost all human activity is economic, while Becker also rightly points to the difficulty of addressing aspects such as aesthetics and identity in economic choices, or recognising reciprocal, redistribution and market aspects of the economy. All of this is fair enough, but as starting points for a chapter (rather than a whole new book) these deliberations seem paralysing, rather than providing productive points of departure for interpreting what economic data have been collected. As a result, the set-up does help in clearly structuring the material into micro-, meso- and large scales of

economic interaction, but has little lasting impact on the overall interpretation.

In spite of these quibbles, this is a readable and interesting section on the distribution mechanisms of Monti Lessini flint, Gargano flint from the Defensola mines, obsidian, green stones such as jadeites, and Spondylus shells. There are some real high points to the presentation, for example the identification of two geographically almost exclusive distribution networks of Lessini flint and obsidian, which mirror divisions already suggested for pottery styles and burial rites, or the investigation into the “roots” of what would later become the extensive jadeite prestige goods network. In contrast, Spondylus never quite reaches the importance it held for example in central Europe. Finally, some more “everyday” aspects of the economy are also considered, looking at long-distance trade of pottery vessels and/or their (perhaps alcoholic) contents and providing an overview over the cereal and animal species that formed the mainstay of the subsistence economy, yet without addressing production conditions (such as possible gendered divisions of labour). The tantalising glimpse of possible dietary diversity (and hence perhaps economic specialisation) in the ENL II is also something that deserves further investigation. Overall, there is a clear bias towards prestige and exotic goods, but this is partly justified by the existing imbalance in the study of these different economic aspects. At the end of this chapter, Becker succeeds in establishing that there were indeed micro-levels of daily economic choices, meso-levels of production sites with possible part-time specialists, and macro-levels of regional preferences, but more could have been done here to integrate these strands.

The final summary and outlook effectively reiterates the main conclusions concerning the origins and spread of the Neolithic in Italy, the cultural bipartition of the country that can be gleaned in spite of the many overlapping culture groups, and the longer- and shorter-distance mobilities that characterised the period, while also reminding the reader of all the necessary caveats of research history, taphonomy and current state of publication. The main themes are drawn out well, although the discussion of how ceramic styles could have been used as social capital sensu Bourdieu (1979), how this related to economic capital, and how the interplay fitted into a social context otherwise characterised as relatively egalitarian, could have been pushed a little further. Finally, Becker defines some key topics for future research, which will hopefully inspire many others to follow her lead and make room for Italy as a central case study in

the Neolithisation debate: alongside further work on basic issues, such as chronology, bioarchaeological data and regional syntheses of settlement evidence, she names contacts across the Alps from a long-term perspective, the relations to the Balkans (particularly perhaps to the Malo Korenovo phenomenon) and the potential indirect links this may have opened to central Europe from the beginning of the ENL. Overall, Becker convincingly shows that the Italian material offers enormous possibilities for further theoretical and empirical study and has the potential to add new and exciting angles to Neolithic research at a European level.

How can one best sum up this kaleidoscope of a volume? I could not help to be impressed by Becker’s mastery of a vast amount of material, by her capacity to summarise and present it clearly and in a manner that will make it accessible and useful to scholars with other research priorities than her own. I was very much taken with the breadth of themes that were addressed and with the inter-regional outlook which consistently informed the volume. This is an ambitious and brave work, and above all it is a must-read entry point for those with little or no prior knowledge of the Italian case (such as myself). It provides plenty of inspiration for further research and the resources (not least bibliographical) to get started. In all these ways, this volume not only fills a necessary gap, but is a true eye-opener. Probably however, it is precisely this very broad approach that has sometimes prevented Becker from finding a strong and coherent interpretative line for the evidence (in contrast, for example, to the much more targeted and regionally more tightly focussed offerings such as ROBB, 2007). This is not a problem for aspects such as inter-regional connections, but much more glaring for economic behaviour or in discussions of past identities and social structure. The theoretical sections in these chapters are often blocky, pointing out impasses and caveats rather than outlining a confident narrative line. It sometimes seems as if Becker is needlessly worried about putting a foot wrong or being contradicted. Given her thorough knowledge of this material, she is one of the best-placed persons to conjure up a vivid picture of life in Neolithic Italy, and she must have plenty of ideas. It is to be hoped that these will be explored in many articles and further studies to come, where she can more selectively draw on the wealth of data she has amassed and exploit its interpretative possibilities more fully. For now, this volume stands as an impressive, timely and thoroughly researched contribution that will be a go-to source for years to come. Well done!

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