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Richter, Tobias

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Comment on Maher and Conkey “Homes for Hunters? Exploring the Concept of Home at Hunter-Gatherers Sites in Upper Palaeolithic Europe and Epipalaeolithic of southwest Asia”

Tobias Richter, Center for the Study of Early Agricultural Societies, Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, richter@hum.ku.dk

Maher and Conkey’s central argument is that Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers in southwest Asia and Europe (and I suppose elsewhere) did not just build structures for shelter, but that these dwellings also created a sense of place and made these places hunter-gatherer homes. Mundane, everyday practices and construction activities, but also funerary rituals and ceremonies at particular locales or nodes within the landscape created attachments to place and made them homes. At the same time they stress that we must also consider how not just sites, but the landscape as a whole, shaped such experiences and contributed to a sense of home and belonging. Their argument draws on the critique of the often dichotomous terminology that is applied to Palaeolithic and Neolithic architecture (huts, hamlets and camps in the Palaeolithic, versus houses, villages and settlements in the Neolithic). This continues a long-running critique of the dichotomization between how archaeologists have interpreted the archaeological signatures of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic hunter-gatherers, versus those of farmers (Gamble 2004; Gamble and Gittins 2004; Wobst 2000). Whereas the former are usually studied from ecological and evolutionary perspectives, symbolism, social relations and cosmology play a much more important role in the study of the latter. This dichotomy is still perfectly captured in Richard Bradley’s old adage that “successful farmers have social relations with one another, while hunter-gatherers have ecological relations with hazelnuts” (Bradley 1984, 11).

Their point is well made and on the whole I agree with their critique and argument, having made similar points about hunter-gatherer place making and social interaction in the context of the Epipalaeolithic of southwest Asia less eloquently myself (Richter 2009). Their call for a more nuanced and less stereotypical view of Palaeolithic communities also resonates with broader critiques of overarching social evolutionary meta-narratives. It is indeed puzzling why many archaeologists working in the Palaeolithic continue to be overly concerned with only looking at environment, resources and technology, but not with the social and meaning-creating activities of the people they study.

Reading their article did leave me wondering, however, whether the concept of ‘home’ generally is a useful one. Maher and Conkey rightly criticise the use of this term when it comes to the Neolithic, where it is applied uncritically to sites with ‘houses’ (although to be fair, its use is not widespread). At the same time, if we can be critical of its use in the Neolithic, should we not also be aware of its pitfalls when expanding the use of this term to the Palaeolithic? Maher and Conkey rightly acknowledge that the concept of home is ambiguous and difficult to pin down. But therein lies a problem: ‘home’ encompasses such a wide range of culturally specific meanings that its usefulness as a cross-cultural concept might be problematic (see papers in Benjamin, Stea, and Aren 1995). Although some of the connotations ‘home’ evokes are probably less culturally dependent, most conceptualisations of home will, I would expect, be difficult, if not impossible, to translate from one

socio-cultural context to the next. I do not imagine that Maher and Conkey would disagree that place-making and home-making are also culturally specific and contingent. However, if we accept this then we ought to also ask whether or in how far the concept of home can or should be understood as a human universal? We ought to also be aware in how far the concept of home might encapsulate specific notions stemming from western experience and romantic notions of belonging? Moreover, at a time of refugee and mass migration ‘crisis’, and increasing social inequality, we must also pay attention to the political dimension of what it means to have or not have a ‘home’.

Another danger I see is that by extending this concept to the hunter-gatherers of the deep past, are we not dismissing the fundamental ‘otherness’ of these societies, by linking them more to a concept that is, arguably, quite central to how we define our experience in the modern West? There is no doubt that the use of the concept of home is problematic when it is only applied to the Neolithic, but notwithstanding Maher and Conkey’s valid criticisms of how Palaeolithic societies are generally interpreted as less imbued with social meaning, I worry that extending this concept even further does not fully solve the issue. It has been argued repeatedly that archaeological interpretations of the Neolithic have been influenced by linking the ‘origins of agriculture’ in a long social evolutionary narrative to the modern, western experience, neglecting the fundamental otherness of Neolithic societies (e.g. Edmonds 2002; Thomas 1991, 2002, 2004). We should therefore also be mindful not to extend this narrative back even further by creating generalised continuities that make these societies appear to be more similar to our own than they likely were. A deeper discussion on the concept of home, and a nuanced definition, is therefore necessary to avoid creating a notion of sameness that ignores or conflates the fundamental differences in social and cultural experience that undoubtedly characterised Palaeolithic societies.

In sum, I applaud Maher and Conkey for their analysis and contribution, and hope that my comments may serve to continue and expand the debate on home-making in early human societies somewhat.

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