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Beyond paradigms

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Un-packaging Neolithic societies: from static notions to bottom-up models of social organization

Theme: Archaeological theory and methods beyond paradigms

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Traditional ideas about Neolithic societies were shaped by questionable premises. The modern concept of social and cultural coherence of residence groups and the ethnic interpretation of 'archaeological cultures' fostered ideas of static and homogeneous social entities with fixed borders. Farming – as the core of the Neolithic way of life - was rather associated with sedentariness than with mobility. Furthermore, the widely used (neo-)evolutionist thinking, assumed an universally growing social hierarchization in the course of prehistory. After all, such 'top-down'-perspectives deprived individuals and groups of genuine agency and creativity. In recent years, a wide array of empirical results on social practices related to material culture and settlement dynamics, (inter-) regional entanglements and spatial mobility based on Stable Isotope Analyses, aDNA etc. were produced. Yet the question of possible inferences regarding the social organization has not been addressed sufficiently.

Therefore, the aim of the session is to study social practice and organization in Neolithic societies based on such results by adopting bottom-up perspectives. We want to discuss how data can be methodologically combined on the basis of corresponding theories as well as the potential of such bottom-up approaches to infer models of social organization which may live up to the diversity and dynamism of Neolithic societies. This might include perspectives on mobility, social complexity, the importance of (political) interests and factors of kinship. We welcome papers addressing the following questions: What are the models of Neolithic societies used in current research?

What kind of premises are projected onto the past and why?

What kind of data is available and how can we combine those to explore different forms of social organization?

What theories are used to approach social organization in prehistoric contexts?

How could archaeology thereby benefit from anthropological perspectives?

What are the epistemological limits regarding the social organization of Neolithic communities?