
Para-Neolithic in Eastern and East-Central Europe. Reflection of our classificatory imagination or reflection of the real past?

Marek Nowak*¹

¹Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Institute of Archaeology – Gołębia 11, 31-007 Kraków, Poland

Abstract

In Eastern but also in East-Central Europe hunter-gatherer communities existed deeply into the Holocene, even until the 2nd millennium BC. However, this fact is somewhat overlooked or even forgotten in common knowledge. In case of Eastern Europe, this is due to the widely used term 'Neolithic' to designate such communities with pottery. In East-Central Europe communities of this kind, including also those using pottery, coexisted with the "proper Neolithic" communities (i.e. characterized by the presence of a full "Neolithic Package"), probably until the beginning of the Bronze Age. In scientific practice, the latter ones attract most attention and somewhat eliminate the awareness of the former. A situation of this kind, resulting largely from ingrained research traditions, makes it difficult to reconstruct prehistoric reality in all these territories. It also causes problems of a classificational and terminological nature when analysing the relations between hunter-gatherer groupings (but also agricultural ones) of Eastern and East-Central Europe, especially in the belt between the Baltic and the Black Sea. Of course, such problems also arise in case of wider scale comparisons, when we analyse the references to hunter-gatherers or farmers in other territories. Archaeological data relating to these topics can be better interpreted and understood through the results of genetic investigations. However, their number has so far been rather modest. The correct approach to typology of different components of material culture and to the issue of homogeneity of sites (including contexts of the increasing numbers of radiocarbon dates) is therefore fundamental. Taking these factors into account demonstrates that, despite the evident, longstanding interactions between farmers and hunter-gatherers, the latter groups are by no means disintegrating and disappearing, even in East-Central Europe. Neolithic or rather Neolithic-like elements, which spread through cultural transmission, are taken over by them very selectively. One can speak of cultural self-awareness and mentality, separate from the "typically" Mesolithic and Neolithic, including, among others, mental resilience in relation to the "proper" Neolithic. Of the many terms that these communities are sometimes called, perhaps the most appropriate is therefore the para-Neolithic, since it is the one that accentuates the alternativeness to the "proper" Neolithic. Should we treat the para-Neolithic in general prehistoric schemes more as Neolithic or Mesolithic? The answer to this question is not simple and obvious (however, to describe the past we have to classify it somehow). Perhaps there is no need at all to match the para-Neolithic with the Mesolithic or Neolithic. As a matter of fact, it depends on the accepted classificatory perspective. Let us remember, for example, that not only the notion of Neolithic but also of Mesolithic is defined differently. In any case, the idea of the para-Neolithic better illustrates that not all phenomena in prehistory closely match the discrete concepts generated by modern prehistorians, like for example Mesolithic or Neolithic.

*Speaker

Keywords: Eastern Europe, EastCentral Europe, late Mesolithic, Neolithic, proto Neolithic, cultural interactions, archaeological classifications