

EAA Kiel – Widening Horizons, 8-11 Sept.

CfP Session: #418 Should I stay or should I go? Patterns of mobility in prehistoric sedentary and pastoralist societies

Theme: 1. Widening horizons through human-environment interconnections
Session format: Regular session

Not so long ago, one might have been forgiven for thinking that people in prehistoric sedentary societies did not move around so much. Yet we now command an overwhelming amount of data which seem to show the exact opposite and have blurred the distinction between sedentary and more mobile ways of life. Ancient DNA, isotopes and new insights from human and animal osteology have come to supplement traditional artefact studies to create a picture of people – be it individuals, groups of people or larger social units –, animals and things constantly on the move – for shorter or longer distances, over varying amounts of time, and for widely different reasons. Our main challenge now is how to make sense of this diversity.

Mobility occurs at different spatial scales, from short distances travelled for obtaining resources to long travels, perhaps among complete strangers. It can happen at very different rhythms, from daily or seasonal rounds, to settlement relocation at yearly or decadal frequencies, to once-in-a-lifetime journeys. Tracing and identifying these scales, let alone agents and their reasons, makes huge demands on our data, both scientific (i.a. dating methods, isotopes, artefact sourcing studies, DNA) and more traditionally archaeological (stylistic comparisons, data concerning settlement and economy, etc.). However, this necessary attention to detail can make it hard to compare results and patterns across case studies, in order to identify recurrent trends.

In this session, we aim to bring together scholars who are working in particular prehistoric contexts in which different forms of mobility co-exist. We would like to focus on how these different mobilities come together to form a particular way of life or dynamic system, and what variables are responsible for creating/changing these patterns. We hope that a broad comparison of synthetic case studies across prehistory can help us grasp the bigger picture.

Keywords: mobility patterns, sedentary societies, pastoralists, combining scales

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