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Early Farming in the Land of Springs Settlement patterns and agriculture in Neolithic Greece

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the role of climate, environment, and water distribution in the landscape for the development of the Neolithic farming economy in Greece. Contrasts between regional settlement patterns revealed by archaeological surveys are examined, supplemented by evidence from excavated settlements and data from archaeozoology and palaeoethnobotany. As a first step, in 1996, the site patterns from the surveys in Berbati-Limnes (Paper 1), southern Argolid and Nemea were compared to that of eastern Thessaly (Paper 2). However, great uncertainties in the relative chronology between southern Greece and Thessaly in the Final Neolithic and Early Bronze Age only permitted a very broad outline. To improve the chronological resolution an analysis of ceramic sequences and radiocarbon date series from Greece and southeast Europe was made (Paper 3), which indicated that the Thessalian Rachmani period may be essentially equated with the southern Greek Final Neolithic. In the light of this new chronology the more recent survey evidence from the eastern Peloponnesos and eastern Thessaly is examined, and previously proposed explanatory models tested. The main conclusions are that the contrasts in settlement patterns between the wetter/colder regions (Thessaly, Nemea, the Arcadian highlands and parts of Laconia) and the southeastern dry belt (the Argolid, Methana and the Cyclades) appear to be related to differences in climate and vegetation. The fertile soils of eastern Thessaly were sufficiently well watered to sustain a dense network of farming villages through the Early-Late Neolithic. By contrast, in the dry southeast, the Early-Middle Neolithic villages were dependent on large water sources, and the Late Neolithic shift towards cave and island occupations indicates resource diversification and an increase in pastoralism, which continued with the dispersal of small upland sites in the Final Neolithic. Reduced site numbers in Final Neolithic Thessaly suggests that pastoralism was impeded in these densely wooded mountains. Not until the Early Bronze Age is there a clear agricultural expansion in both north and south, consistent with widespread use of the plough. The evidence thus suggests a temporal separation in Greece between the key factors of the "secondary products revolution" model; pastoralism and plough agriculture. It is also proposed that the combination of pastoralism and cultivation of vines and olives, specifically suited to the southeastern climate and environment, permitted a full exploitation of this region and played a fundamental role in the remarkable expansion of settlement and trade in the Final Neolithic-Early Bronze Age Aegean.

Keywords: Neolithic Greece, Thessaly, settlement patterns, springs, agriculture, pastoralism, secondary products, plough, olive, vine.