INTRODUCTION

The Neolithic witnessed some of the most profound transformations in human history: the inception and spread of agriculture and animal husbandry, permanent settlement in solid houses, growing populations around fixed locales, long-distance trade in raw material such as obsidian, craft specialization in lithic production, the beginnings of simple metallurgy, the use of pyrotechnology in the making of plaster and the production of ceramics, simple methods of marking ownership of objects and goods, and the construction of structures for sacred rituals. To be sure these—and no doubt many more invisible but equally significant developments—took place over a span of several thousand years, with variable emphases from region to region. Nevertheless, it is not too much to say that the foundations of what we consider to be basic attributes of our civilization were established during the Neolithic. This first touch of familiarity encourages us to seek analogs in prehistory for some of the intangibles of human life. “Social configurations” is one of these. What can we say about the ways Neolithic societies

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were organized? Can we apply uniformitarian ideas such that the past merges seamlessly with the present? Few would affirm such a notion, yet implicitly we all base our interpretations on combinations of our experiences, ethnographic examples, and more abstract theories about the ways people and societies behave that are derived from the modern world.

Although there is grave danger in imposing our realities on the past, as a start we may consider inequalities or, as expressed more mundanely, differences. The mother’s milk of archaeology is difference. Change and variability are operational aspects of difference, and these, rather than unvarying similarity, excite our imagination. In this chapter I question the relationship between two kinds of differences, size of site and special architectural units. This inquiry questions whether large sites are tangible expression of regional importance—that such sites are “centers” affecting social relations within their sphere of influence (Rollefson 1987; Kuijt 1994). The corollary is that small settlements are relatively insignificant and unlikely to have been the residence of regional leaders or the locale of important activities. One need only look at the modern world to find countless examples where relative size is a reliable indication of relative importance: hence, the uniformitarian approach makes eminent sense. However, since the obvious sometimes proves to be wrong, I merely ask whether there are clear indications that the largest sites differ in substantial ways from the smallest settlements during the PPNB.

A fair amount of theory implies that to buffer inherent conflict when people live together in large numbers, there must be organizing principles and customs, usually considered to be manifest in principals and institutions (Wright 1984; Flannery 1995). What problems might arise? In any community, bickering, bullying, thieving and a nearly unending host of similar issues might arise. More serious from a structural point of view would be attempts by individuals or groups to accumulate power and authority and become unequal. Whereas in small, ephemeral communities the aggrieved often merely remove themselves and migrate to a friendlier community, this is not as tenable when one has agricultural fields and stores. In such cases, the first resort is usually to the family and its extensions, and the aggrieved may or may not find an effective solution in these parleys, particularly if the offenses take place solely within the familial setting. Heads of households may try to resolve disputes between their groups, but this relies on personal persuasion, which lacks effective long-term sanctions. Feuds that may last generations keep tension alive. In most preurban (even prestate) communities there is unlikely to have been any formally constituted “police” to keep order and punish transgressors; rather action normally would be taken by ad hoc groups of affected relatives.

Even in communities where individuals and families have essential autonomy, there are group norms and customs that regulate behavior. These