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## Introduction

In both archaeology and anthropology, the house is acknowledged as a central and recurrent anchor in all aspects of many people's lives. Physically this is where many people dwelled, and socially and conceptually the house is one of the key frames for the grounding of relationships and worldviews. In Neolithic and other prehistoric archaeology, we can trace a burst of interpretive interest in the house from the beginning of the 1990s, witnessed in [Bailey \(1990\)](#) and [Hodder \(1990\)](#), and continuing since (for example: [Beck 2007](#); [Hofmann and Smyth 2013](#); [Richards 2005](#); [Souvatzi 2008](#); [Tringham 2005](#)). Such studies in part drew on anthropological discussions (to cite just a few: [Bloch 1995](#); [Bourdieu 1977](#); [Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995](#); [Joyce and Gillespie 2000](#); [Waterson 1990](#)), picking up among other themes the ideas of the biography, agency and symbolism of the house, the composition of the household, and exploring the usefulness of the house societies model. In all these studies, however, the temporality and history of specific houses are one dimension which has received rather variable attention.

In her paper, 'When is a house?', Susan Gillespie (2007, 40) drew general attention to 'various temporal scales, linking microscale processes and practices at the level of households to macroscale and multifaceted processes'. She emphasised that 'houses are *in* history', which 'means that the outcomes of their members' actions *make* history, including unintended consequences' (Gillespie 2007, 41; original emphasis). She also noted, with reference to Lévi-Strauss and the house societies model, 'the house as an instrument of rapprochement' between anthropology and history (Gillespie 2007, 41). There is a gap, however, between these laudable general claims and the detail available for close examination of the durations, contexts and histories of Neolithic houses in south-east Europe, which are the particular focus of our paper. Gillespie's important contribution was published in the much-cited *The durable house* (Beck 2007). That deals with the usefulness of the houses societies model (which is not our principal concern here). The notion of durability there is attached especially to the possibility of the transmission of the house as concept, moral person and social institution. Probably the majority of prehistorians would tend also to accept the notion of houses that lasted, for variable but often imprecisely quantified periods of time, and that is what we want to challenge.

So our paper will first very briefly review what has been claimed in the literature about the duration of Neolithic houses in south-east Europe, and beyond, and then go on to present formally modelled results which offer unusually precise chronologies for the houses in the Neolithic tell of Uivar in western Romania (from the later sixth to the earlier fifth millennia cal

BC). These house lives can and must be seen in context, drawing on other features of the tell, including a succession of encircling ditches, some of them at least interpreted as defensive. Overall, we offer a detailed and dynamic biography for this site, which we believe presents, more or less for the first time in this kind of archaeology, the kind of specific history — those people in that place at those times — to which Gillespie has alluded in general terms. That raises many implications, which we go on to discuss. Amongst these, an important clash is emerging, we believe, between historical and relational or ontological approaches. Although many researchers now advocate sharing or distributing agency across the spectrum of people, animals, things and material that are seen to constitute social worlds, we do not want to give up the opportunity to write detailed histories of sites like Uivar — detailed narratives with plot, driven in the end by people — just when these begin to come within our grasp. We will discuss how houses are caught up in this debate.

### **The duration of the house**

Carsten and Hugh-Jones noted (1995, 3) that houses can get taken for granted, for a series of reasons and in all manner of ways. How long do houses, in all their varieties of form, kind and membership, last?

In south-east Europe, a range of estimates of house duration has been suggested, in the contexts of both tell and flat settlements (e.g. Chapman 1997; Souvatzi 2008). Since the chronology of tells has rarely been established precisely, there have unsurprisingly been varied estimates of the duration of occupation levels in tells and the buildings they contained, for example at Vinča-Belo Brdo, Serbia (Chapman 1981; Stevanović and Jovanović 1996). Estimates there have run as high as about 50 years for each inferred structural horizon, though not for the buildings within them as such (Chapman 1981, 10); a formally modelled estimate for one building in the last certain Neolithic structural horizon at Vinča-Belo Brdo is for probably ~~fewer~~ **less than** 15 years (Tasić *et al.* 2015). Flat settlements do not have the same apparent emphasis on continuity as tells, and at least for the example of Opovo, Serbia, lightly built structures have been equated with shorter occupation than on tells, though that difference has not been quantified (Tringham *et al.* 1985). Modelled estimates for house duration of around 30 years have also been suggested for the tell at Okolište, Bosnia (R. Hofmann 2013, 473), though on the basis of fewer than 30 radiocarbon dates, mainly on samples of disarticulated animal bone, for a sequence through some 4m of tell deposit. Very few sites (note also Polgár-Csőszhalom, Hungary: Raczky *et al.* 2015) have had their chronology rigorously tested, which sits uneasily alongside the otherwise sophisticated

discussions (including the possibility of deliberate destruction, especially by fire: Tringham 2005) of the roles and meanings of the house in **Neolithic south-east Europe**.

**There is also a wide range of models of house duration in other European Neolithic archaeology.**

One well known example is the *Hofplatzmodell* for sixth-millennium cal BC LBK timber longhouses, according to which they existed within their own space and were replaced regularly at interval of between 25–30 years (summarised and reviewed in Zimmermann 2012). That has been challenged with an alternative model of layout in rows and durations of 70 years or more (Rück 2009). Debate on the issue continues, but the point to underline here is that neither the range of durations nor the possibility of variation through space and time (Lenneis 2012) have been properly tested (nor will that be easy). In the Alpine foreland of the fourth and third millennia BC, dendrochronology has established much more reliably a series of mainly brief lives for well-built wooden houses, often over a span as short as 10–15 years (Ebersbach 2013). The end of some buildings may have been hastened by damage caused by fluctuating water levels in the lakes beside which many were placed, and others by fire, but it has been emphasised recently that, despite our perception that the Neolithic saw a shift to sedentary existence, permanence of structures seems not to have been valued here (D. Hofmann 2013); greater continuity can be found in the context of local settlement networks and local landscapes (D. Hofmann *et al.* 2016).

We also note briefly that the anthropological literature often appears either to neglect the duration of houses altogether — a convenience of the ethnographic present — or to offer rather anecdotal observations (cf. Waterson 2013, 374). Some studies stress longevity and the process of ageing, others emphasise relative brevity, while an interesting third strand has explored the circumstance of deliberate destruction, truncating use-lives (among others: McIntosh 1974; Waterson 1990; Bloch 1995).

If there is a single thread running through all this diversity, it is that context, social practice and history are key to understanding the house, but without precise chronology, those dimensions are hard to catch (see also Souvatzi 2012, 178–84). With that claim, we move to the case study of Neolithic Uivar.

### **The Uivar tell**

The Uivar tell lies in the Banat plain in western Romania, on a major branch of the Timiș valley (Drașovean and Schier 2010; Fig. 1). It is one of the many settlement mounds or tells which

appeared in the Carpathian basin from the later sixth millennium cal BC, formed by repeated occupation and rebuilding on the same spot (Bailey 1990). Investigated by a joint Romanian-German team from 1998–2009, the site proved to consist not only of the visible tell, of some 3ha and with a vertical stratigraphy of 4m, but also thanks to geophysical survey, several encircling ditches, the outermost of which appears to form an ellipse over 350 by 200m in extent and a total area of some 12ha; there were also further features between the tell and the outermost ditch (Fig. 2). The site was excavated by a series of trenches, sampling both the tell and ditches, and in three instances the off-tell occupation in between.

The geophysical survey enabled a view of the layout of the top of the tell, with overall many closely-set buildings, in a more or less regular concentric layout (perhaps with an empty central space), many of which were burned as they appeared as strong anomalies in the geophysical plot. The excavated trenches on the tell uncovered much smaller areas, but showed a succession of buildings, again closely set, from the bottom to the top of the occupation. There were no visible hiatuses in this formation, but successive levels, or ‘building stages’, were marked variously by burning or levelling (Fig. 3). Succeeding levels appear broadly to follow the same orientation and spacing. The buildings in question were rectangular, and post-framed, with the walls often further defined by foundation or bedding trenches; walls would have been generally formed of wattle and daub rather than solid planking. Up to 12m long by 6m wide, these houses were normally subdivided into two or three rooms. Some buildings had two storeys, either over their whole length or just part of it; in the former case, subdivision into rooms also occurs. The general trend is from more heavily built buildings earlier in the sequence to lighter constructions later on, probably relating to changing wood supply when primary forests were gradually converted into secondary ones (Schier 2009, 220). Internal features include hearths, clay ovens and bins, large storage pots, small raised platforms and what are thought to be small cult settings or shrines (Fig. 4). There is some evidence for painted walls, and for repeated re-plastering of internal wall surfaces. Domestic material was found in the houses and in the levelling layers, including pottery, stone and bone tools, loom weights, querns, and occupation debris included animal bone, charred plant remains and charcoal. Abundance varied between burned and unburned houses. There is no doubt that these buildings were lived in, perhaps by some kind of family unit, though the composition and variety of households in question are hard to pin down in any more detail. Geophysical survey identified burned houses off-tell, and one excavated off-tell example showed a broadly similar architecture, though with an unusual raised floor and

surrounding boardwalk (Draşovean and Schier 2010, fig. 26); there could be many more such off-tell buildings, unburned and not so far detected beneath c. 1.4m of overlying colluvium.

Ditch circuits were found from the edge of the Uivar tell outwards (a finding now common in south-east Europe following extensive geophysical survey). The Uivar survey suggests these were largely continuous, though small gaps can be seen; one entrance was partly excavated close to the tell. The ditches vary in width and depth. For example, close to the tell the first ditch (F1237) was more than 3m deep, though its width could not be gauged. Another ditch of unknown dimensions succeeded this (F1053). Later still followed the greatest ditch (F1043=F1054), up to almost 7m wide and 4m deep, probably fronted by a plank wall. Another ditch (F1029) runs parallel at a few metres distance, with a horizontal plank wall along its inner side. The outermost ditch was 4–6m wide and 2–2.5m deep, with a backing palisade, and another substantial ditch fairly close inside it. Other ditches and palisades were investigated. The amount of material in the fills of the ditches varied; generally, those close to the tell had more abundant remains than those further out. Cut into alluvial subsoil, these would presumably have infilled rather quickly by natural processes; evidence for cleaning or recutting was only observed in one trench. Circuits of this kind could have had a variety of roles, which need not have been mutually exclusive. They could have served to define, draw attention to and generally enhance the look of the settlement; this would apply to ditches both close to the foot of the tell and those further out. They could have kept animals out of the close-set buildings of the settlement, and conversely within the confines of the outer circuits. But their scale, numbers and frequent remodelling also strongly suggest that they had a defensive function (Fig. 5; Draşovean and Schier 2010, 172), not perhaps against prolonged aggression, but as protection against surprise or **quick attack**.

The Uivar site can be related to a shifting set of cultural affiliations or networks, seen best in the changing styles of its pottery. In brief, its earlier levels have pots which can be assigned to the Szakálhát style typical of adjacent southern Hungary (Kalicz and Makkay 1977); from building stage 3b onwards, pottery of Vinča C1 and then C2 style appeared, part of a network centred in Serbia (Schier 1996); and in some of the uppermost features, pots of Foeni style were found, relating to a distribution across the Banat and to the east and north (Draşovean 2009).

#### **The Uivar chronology: *curriculum vitae* of a tell**

Site stratigraphy, material culture, radiocarbon dates on short-life, single-entity samples and formal Bayesian modelling (Bayliss and Whittle 2015, and references) provide a powerful

framework within which to provide a refined chronology for the biography of the Uivar tell. The chronological model for Neolithic occupation at Uivar combines a total of 182 radiocarbon dates with the archaeological sequence, crucially with the 4m of vertical stratigraphy through a series of 11 building stages through the tell excavated in Trench I. It has been constructed using OxCal v4.2 (Bronk Ramsey 2009; Bronk Ramsey and Lee 2013) and is fully discussed in Schier *et al.* (forthcoming, figs 6.9 and 6.12–6.22). The tell was occupied from the fifty-second to the forty-seventh centuries cal BC. Here we concentrate on the chronologies of the houses in **Trench I (with some use of Trench II for the uppermost building stages)** and the series of ditch circuits around the tell **produced by the Bayesian modelling** (Fig. 6 and Table 1). **It is not possible to correlate the partial sequences of other trenches by direct stratigraphic comparison, since the trenches are too far apart, and seriation of the pottery from Trenches I, II and XI has yet to be completed. It can be noted that Figure 8, however, is a provisional attempt to correlate the vertical stratigraphy in Trench I (and partially Trench II) with the features revealed in other trenches.**

The refined dates for the use and demise of the successive houses on the Uivar tell enable much more precise estimates for the duration of their use than normally achieved. As Fig. 7 shows, house durations demonstrably varied, and were not uniform, as too often proposed in the archaeological models noted above. Some durations were shorter (in building stages 5b, 5a and 3a), and others longer (in building stages 4b and 4a), the spans of use ranging from a decade or so up to some 50 years. Building stages 3d and 3c had to be combined as a single value in the modelling (no dateable material could be located from stage 3c), but its total duration can be broken down into two, given the evidence for extensive repairs through the thick level in question rather than the more usual levelling and rebuilding. Building stage 2b is the longest-lasting, with a probable duration of some 80 years.

There is an apparently cyclical pattern of alternating shorter and longer durations, from the shorter lives of the early houses in stages 5b and 5a, to the longer biographies of the houses in stages 4b and 4a, to the two phases of stage 3d+c, to the longer existence of stage 3b, followed in turn by the briefer duration of stage 3a and then finally by the longest span of all, in the form of building stage 2b. The uppermost Late Neolithic building stages 2a and 1f consist of some foundation structures, but are heavily disturbed by mediaeval pits and have provided little dating evidence.

All the burnt houses (in stages 4b, 4a and 2b) were longer-lasting compared to the others in the Uivar sequence. There is probably no clear correlation with the sturdiness of these structures, since the overall trend through time was from heavier to lighter buildings; presumably therefore duration of use has no simple explanation in the durability of the houses. Both Hthe houses 4b 2b gave evidence for the application of a second floor layer of some 6-8 cm, covering both the ground and upper floor. This must have considerably raised the weight to be supported by the internal wooden framework, which had been designed sufficiently stable from the beginning. But also the unburnt houses of phase 3b also witness concern for their future stability, as evidenced carefully laid out worked wooden planks, acting as support for the ground floor made of loam. The house architecture displays an intention of stability and expected long house life. The diversity of construction, thus, does not reflect different life expectancies — the “biographical diversity” of Uivar houses suggests, rather, social discontinuities or external causes for their differing lifespans. ~~The character of the structures may be much more relevant, though~~ ~~Of~~ irregular intervals. Houses 4b-1 and 4a-1 could both be seen as distinctive. Both are substantial, with several rooms; 4b-1 has two storeys, as does House 2b-1. House 4b-1 was re-plastered up to five times at least. House 4b-1 contained intriguing evidence for a small shrine or special setting in the westernmost room of the ground floor, and a portable altar, a re-plastered floor, imported pottery and a loom on the upper floor. House 4a-3 contained a clay head originally attached to a wall, and a clay table. These three structures need not be seen as identical, nor a single special function for them argued, but the evidence does allow a correlation between their longer durations and the effort invested in their building and furnishing. **Further detail will be available in due course in the site monographs.**

The Neolithic period in south-east Europe stands out for the frequency of **house burning**. Different opinions (e.g. **Chapman 1999; Stevanović 2002; Tringham 2005**) are held on whether we can distinguish between individual or wider house burnings, between accidental and deliberate burnings, and in the latter scenario, between differing motivations such as aggressive acts among and between households and communities or the ritual and symbolic ending of individual households, say at the end of household lives or on the death of household leaders. In the case of Uivar, the small area of the excavation trenches precludes definitive judgment, but the geophysical survey showed numerous anomalies indicating burned buildings, which certainly suggests that in the upper level of occupation on the tell burning was extensive; this is consistent with the excavated evidence at the end of building stage 2b. This cannot be examined over the

**Commented [AW1]:** Wolfram, Florin: I think this would be a good place for very brief further additions to keep the reviewers happy about 'household practice' and changes through time. Could you add a sentence or two about the longer-lasting houses later in the sequence [replasterings? Contents/quantities? Any further provisional observations in advance of the monograph?]? I know this is a bit irritating, as we have actually already covered the point, but tactically we have to be seen to be responding!

**Commented [SW2R1]:** I don't know whether this is what you and/or the reviewer expects. But we are not able to elaborate on differences in house inventories, since we just haven't analysed them in any detail yet. The in situ recorded pottery fragments still await restoration in Banat Museum – so this is clearly an issue for vol. III/IV!

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same kind of area for the two earlier burnt horizons, at the end of building stages 4b and 4a, but the trench evidence suggests that more than simply single buildings were burned.

This is an important link in the interpretation of the Uivar site. The width and depth of the encircling ditches and their frequent combination with palisades suggest that these circuits were defensive, even if they might also have been at the same time partly symbolic. These ditches have also been dated, though we could not achieve as much precision for them as for the houses (given the lack of constraining stratigraphic sequence and a paucity of datable material). Their sequence can be correlated with that of the houses, however, albeit with greater uncertainty (Schier *et al.* forthcoming). As shown in Fig. 6, the earliest circuit was F1237. This was probably present from the beginning of the occupation, and certainly seems to have been the defensive system that was there at the end of stage 4b, though we could not tell for sure if it had been constructed in building stage 5b, 5a or 4b. Putting together potentially extensive burning of houses at the end of building stage 4b and the demise of the early ditch system, may lead us to see a first dramatic episode in the site biography (Fig. 8, 4b).

Other ditch circuits follow. F1236=F1238 and F1219 may well belong together (Fig. 6). We were again not able to relate them precisely to building stages, but they probably go with building stages 4a or 3d. It is possible to contemplate a correlation of the end of these circuits and the burning, again potentially extensive, seen at the end of building stage 4a (Fig. 8, 4a). Then probably came circuits F1055 and F1158, which probably go with building stages 3d+c or 3b. In these instances, there is no question of relating the demise of ditch circuits with house burnings, since none were observed in the excavated parts of the tell in those stages. Then the outer circuit, ditch F1053 (with its possible gatehouse, House A) and ditch F4045=F4051 were dug, all probably going with building stage 2b (Fig. 8). If burnings and the end of defensive circuits can legitimately be linked, then these were the ditches that could have failed at the end of the long-lasting building stage 2b, which certainly did see extensive burning.

The most impressive of all the Uivar ditches, F1043=F1054 (Fig. 9), probably marks the rebuilding of the defences following this fire, joined by circuits F2108 and the palisade in Trench IX. The ditch F1029 has been modelled here as earlier than F1043/1054, though other possibilities will be discussed elsewhere (Schier *et al.* forthcoming). All these are later than the major fire at the end of building stage 2b, and appear to have been in place during the use of H2a, House 3208 on the tell in Trench XI (and probably also of the undated burnt House

3172/3173), and of House 2245 in Trench XV in the area of 'flat' occupation beyond the tell (Fig. 8). The latter, which cannot be dated very precisely, might be even contemporary with the final Neolithic stage 1f, to which only few foundation structures on top of the tell can be attributed.

Despite the uncertainties about the chronology of the ditches at Uivar and the difficulties of correlating them precisely with building stages, the overall importance of the sequence seems clear. The significance of building duration cannot be assessed out of context. One further factor in the fate of houses may have been the success of settlements and the efficacy of defensive ditch circuits. Ditches were dug from an early stage of the tell, and given their size (and thus the amount of time that it would have taken for them to silt up completely), there was probably some sort of enclosure throughout the life of the tell. Whether things were left to decay when the need for them was less pressing is an open question. The occupants of Uivar seem to have gone in for ditch construction rather than maintenance and repair — could that mean that the defences were only constructed in response to particular threats? It is striking that the longest-lasting building stage, 2b, goes with the biggest ditch circuit. The very durability of the houses which end by being burned may also argue against accidental fires, which could presumably have occurred at any point in their lives. Ditches were also in use at the very end of occupation, when houses on the tell may have been much scarcer and others had perhaps spread out on to the area of flat settlement beyond it.

## **Discussion**

The first of three important wider implications is that the house must be contextualised case by case, and at different points in the sequence within each and every case. After appropriate detailed, formal analysis at Uivar, we can offer a median duration of 36 years for the lives of houses, but that figure taken on its own masks the variation and possible cyclicity of pattern in house durations through the Uivar sequence, and removes house histories at any one stage of the sequence from their context and relationship to other features such as the ditch systems surrounding the tell. Could the apparent brevity of early houses at Uivar, for example, be related to their deliberate destruction? To note just one suggestive analogy, in Toraja, Sulawesi, people built large and impressive structures, with projecting high gables; much effort and skill were invested in their construction (Waterson 1990, 163–6). But many were dismantled, commonly at intervals of 25 years or so, and often before it was necessary from a functional point of view; this

was an essential part of the process by which the house gained history and significance, such that its descendants came to regard it as an origin house (*tongkonan*) (Waterson 2013, 389–90).

We believe that similar variation in house duration can be found in other tells (Tasić *et al.* 2015; 2016), but given diversity, we do not exclude the possibility of a stable duration of house lives in other situations. The wider message, simple but important, for Neolithic archaeology is therefore to mistrust the generalising models for house durations often advocated in past research. That must surely apply to tells and flat settlements in south-east Europe. And elsewhere, variation within and among LBK longhouse settlements through time, for example, may have been more extensive and more dynamic than often modelled in the past. Put bluntly, we have had to work hard to achieve the Uivar chronology presented above, and it will take a considerable collective effort across the discipline to create comparable case studies in the coming years.

A second major implication of our analyses at Uivar is that house and household duration gives powerful insights into the sociality of tell and related communities. We do not equate house simplistically with household — since households could be distributed over more than one structure — but we do argue that variation in house duration as modelled for Uivar speaks for variation in household history (Souvatzi 2008; 2012). Differences in duration differences may influenced by the varying different economic or social meaning of architectural compounds, and 4a at Uivar both were both accompanied by a smaller house along their southern wall, by a wooden floor. This situation suggests that a household in this case consisted of two buildings, rebuilt at least two times in the same spot. Other houses, however, did not have evidence for connected or assigned secondary buildings. Generalising, houses of rather uniform construction are the main constituent of tells in the cultural setting of Uivar; unusually large buildings or formally defined spaces within them are extremely rare. Houses here and on other south-east European tells were closely grouped, variously forming rows, clusters and other layouts; they did not exist on their own. There may well have been neighbourhoods or other differentiation within tell layouts, as well as a sense of overall spatial order; in either case, there is a communal dimension to the setting of houses. Now the symbolic and affective dimensions of community can be complicated and at times contradictory. Community has to be worked at (Birch 2013, 8; Canuto and Yaeger 2000), may be riven with difference (Hoggett 1997), and can be fragile (Amit 2002). The disadvantages of living closely together are a recurrent theme in other documented cases, with tensions, for example, between the interests of individuals or kin groups and the ethos of community, between the values of generosity and the impulse to

aggrandisement, or between corporate ceremony and esoteric knowledge (Pluckhahn 2010, 100). Social tensions can be mitigated or managed through shared practice, or through authority figures and institutions (Pluckhahn 2010, 102). But community is often short-lived (Bandy 2010, 23). The breaking up and relocation of substantial villages are reported in various situations among the Iroquois after only 10–15 years (Creese 2012, 368) or 15–30 years (Birch and Williamson 2013, 153–4). Early Mesa Verde villages have been called ‘social tinderboxes’, which rarely lasted beyond 30–70 years or one–three generations (established with precision through dendrochronology) (Wilshusen and Potter 2010, 178).

In comparison to these examples, tell settlements, with their demonstrably long histories and for the most part, perhaps, their lack of hiatuses, stand out as markedly successful communities which held together for surprisingly long periods of time. But the detail of how this was achieved is very revealing, as seen in our date estimates for Uivar, which appear to indicate a series of ups and downs (though we have already noted that brevity could have been deliberate, at the start of the sequence, to create a sense of antiquity). Much further and more detailed analysis is required in other situations within Neolithic Europe, but by comparison with elsewhere, the longer durations in the latter part of the Uivar sequence may reflect an unusually extended stretch of house occupancy.

The third and final implication is that houses, especially when furnished with precise chronologies, should be more fully integrated into Neolithic histories, as already recommended by Gillespie (2007), ~~as noted above~~. Although key to many Neolithic people’s lives and worldviews, the house has often been rather taken for granted in interpretations of the period. People were settled, or settling down, so this argument goes, and so unsurprisingly had houses as a result; at other times, more fluid conditions led to fewer houses being used, or even none at all that are detectable archaeologically. We often appear to have been content with a distinction between house-rich and house-poor periods, with interpretation focused on practical and symbolic dimensions of houses within static blocks of time, often, within the culture-historical framework, of the order of centuries. If the formal modelling now carried out at Uivar, and similar exercises being conducted on other sites, show much more precisely ordered and dated settlement biographies, involving houses centrally, what kind of history does that suggest?

For us, the kind of narrative now open to construction fundamentally involves people, households, communities, and others, including both potential allies and potential enemies. As a

precisely dated settlement, Uivar stands alone in its immediate setting, and we have to go much further afield in the Carpathian basin at the present stage of research for comparable examples, such as Vinča-Belo Brdo (Tasić *et al.* 2015; 2016) and Alsónyék (Bánffy *et al.* 2016). We note the potential of other sites in the wider region for further chronological refinement in the future (e.g. R. Hofmann 2013; Raczky *et al.* 2015), and one can envisage, perhaps after another generation of research or more, a landscape full of precisely dated sites, such that, with tell settlements in the Carpathian basin in mind especially, **we should in future be able to follow** in close detail the conditions of their emergence, development and finally abandonment in the middle of the fifth millennium cal BC, probably particularly in the 47th and 46th centuries cal BC (Borić 2015). For us, this would be especially a history of interaction between people, in households, neighbourhoods, communities, alliances and hostile relationships, engaged in establishing security, competing for position, and living out beliefs and values characteristic of the time. With enhanced chronological precision, we could hope to write such a history at both a micro- and a macro-scale (cf. Robb and Pauketat 2013, fig. 1.1; Mímisson and Magnússon 2014).

**We believe that there are also further important consequences to discuss**, which go beyond this particular case study, and which speak to the possible future directions of archaeological interpretation as a whole. Whatever the difficulties involved in achieving the kind of multi-scalar perspective sketched above, this would be very much a people-centred view: a history about the agency of people, and in specific circumstances. This is a view shared by virtually all historians; John Lewis Gaddis suggests that historians ‘generalize for particular purposes’, whereas social scientists ‘tend to *embed narratives within generalizations*’ (2002, 62; original emphasis). Anthropocentric accounts, however, have been much challenged in the recent literature, across several disciplines. As Marshall and Alberti have put it (2014, 19), ‘an ontological turn is underway... worldviews are being discarded in favour of worlds’. Collectively, a diverse bundle of concepts directly challenges an anthropocentric view of the world, which must also undermine a conventional understanding of historical narrative, at whatever scale is chosen.

One early generalising account, concerned with the development of settlements over the long term and at a global scale, was set out by Michael DeLanda in *A thousand years of nonlinear history* (1997). This advocates flows and meshworks, in the end at a timescale of millennia (DeLanda 1997, 259), even though more precise dates are quoted in the individual chapters; ‘our individual bodies and minds are mere coagulations or decelerations in the flows of biomass, genes, memes, and norms... we might be defined both by the materials we are temporarily binding or chaining

to our organic bodies and cultural minds and by the timescale of the binding operation’ (DeLanda 1997, 258–9) gives a flavour of the nature of this treatment.

A recent account of houses, centred on the early Neolithic settlement of Çatalhöyük in Anatolia, proposes extensive entanglement between people and houses, from an etic and seemingly universalising point of view (Hodder 2012). Using notions not only of non-flat entanglement but also of entrapment, stickiness and practical messiness, and linking all these closely to notions of time, Hodder (2012, 214) argues that ‘the unruliness of things and their complex temporalities entrap humans into forms of care and maintenance’, with emphasis on ‘the networks of entanglement that make possible and constrain certain forms of agency and certain forms of agent’ (Hodder 2012, 215). He further asserts that ‘in their objectness things also have primary agency’ (Hodder 2012, 216). In relation to the houses at Çatalhöyük, his view is that their construction and maintenance ‘drew people into specific forms of relationships, and the gradual decay, slumping and transformation of houses impinged on human lifeways’ and that houses ‘became key to the maintenance of social relationships that were tied into histories’. Finally, ‘humans were increasingly drawn into an entangled web of human-material dependencies in which houses played their part’ (Hodder 2013, 350–60).

We lack the space here to set out all the many and varied sources behind the ontological or relational perspective as a whole, or its many current applications, but we do want to discuss how it affects our view of houses, and the incorporation of houses into what we have called Neolithic histories. First, we note that so far there has been rather little critique within archaeology of the relational approach in general; that is typical enough for the comparatively early stages of the application of a new set of ideas. John Barrett (2014, 68–72; 2016; but see also Fowles 2016; Van Dyke 2015; Vigh and Sausdal 2014) has maintained the value of keeping a distinction between different qualities of humanness and between living and non-living things; he has argued that the agency of things is too indeterminate. Given that Heidegger, for example (quoted in Watts 2013, 8), regarded people as ‘world-forming’, animals as ‘poor in world’, and things as ‘worldless’, we should be very wary of flattening all the concepts noted into a single unified theory. It is far from clear whether the terminology used is emic or etic (as noted by Bird-David 2006, 35), and, controversially, there is potential for confusion between ontology and epistemology; it sometimes appears as if the deployment of ‘ontology’ covertly posits some kind of essentialist or universal relationship between or among constituents of the world (Thomas 2015), in contrast to

the notion of epistemology which denotes a particular, context-dependent, belief in things being as they are (though this distinction can be disputed: Scott 2006, 53–4; see also Carrithers 2010).

Whether ontology or epistemology is preferred, it seems to us that there is a sense in much of the ontological turn of a universal kind of perspective being advocated (note again Gaddis 2002, 62), and that can seem closest to an animist or animic view of the world (Ingold 2011; Scott 2006; Bird-David 2006). According to this, all humans are agents, but there are other agents than humans alone (Ingold 2013, 246); ‘other-than-human’ persons may take many guises (Hallowell 1960). But that immediately raises the difficulty that distinctions can be made within animic or animistic worldviews, and that animism can also be distinguished from, for example, totemism, shamanism and ‘perspectivism’ (Bird-David 2006; Descola 2005). If, by contrast, we revert to the view that there ‘really’ is some kind of fundamental, underlying relationship between people and other constituents of the world, that ignores the fact that many people, emically, have seen the connections in very different ways, at different times and in different places. Even within the nexus of ontological approaches, there are divergent views on what constitutes material agency. Though a ‘flat ontology’ is asserted by some (DeLanda 2004, 58; van der Veen 2014, 809, claiming ‘equal agency’ among people, plants, animals, material culture and environment), it is not universally agreed that people, animals and things act or have effects in the world in the same ways (Ingold 2011, 89–94; Watts 2013, 7).

Houses are caught up in this debate too. We do not have to go far to find examples of emic belief in the vitality of houses. Varying notions in Java, the Malay peninsula and South Sulawesi, for example, of a pervasive life-force are attached to a very wide range of living things and ‘inanimate’ objects, from plants, animals and humans, to mountains, rocks, heirlooms and textiles — and to houses. Such vitality of houses is seen as interdependent with the vitality and health of their occupants; houses were capable of being offended by inappropriate behaviour. House vitality can be traced back to that of trees in the wild and to the construction process, and to the house being thought of and named in terms of the body (Waterson 1990, 115–21). There are plenty of other ethnographic examples in which ‘houses and persons frequently bleed together both conceptually and experientially’ (Creese 2012, 365). Among the Northern Iroquois by the seventeenth century AD, people and their longhouses were perhaps even more closely bound together. Wendat persons were thought of as ‘contingent and changeable wholes’ (Creese 2012, 371) and houses too may have been seen as ensouled entities, closely bound up with people and associated with important war and peace captaincies (Creese 2012, 372).

How far, however, can the agency of the house be taken? Indonesian houses become animated through having people living in them, in various social forms closely associated with the notion of the house (Waterson 1990, 136, and chapter 7). Accounts of the Huron stress the importance of both warfare, as a means to revenge and to establish the position and voice of younger men especially, and of the open councils in which decisions to act — to make friends or to attack enemies — were taken on a more or less egalitarian basis (Trigger 1976, 68–9). Can we not say that in the end, whatever the closeness of the linkage with houses, that it was people who chose to act, or indeed not to act, in particular ways in specific circumstances?

The notion that Neolithic houses in south-east Europe could have had concepts of vitality attached to them is attractive; in the Republic of Macedonia, there are even house models topped by prominent anthropomorphic representations (Naumov 2013). In Uivar there is evidence for foundation rituals, as some house trenches contained concentrations of cattle bones, fragments of clay figurines and in one instance half of a clay mask (Schier 2006). In the very different context of the circumpolar North, dancers ‘wear animal masks which bring the spirits into life amidst the audience’ (Bird-David 2006, 36) and perhaps something similar can be envisaged for the striking though enigmatic mask found in the Phase 2a at Uivar, within the foundation ditch of House H2a-1 (Schier 2006, 228–30). Such putative vitality might have been a quality ascribed to tells in general, since their rising mounds, with the close-knit assemblage within them of people, houses, animals and a profuse abundance of things, could plausibly have been thought of not only as alive but also as growing.

This does not avoid the objection, however, that it would most plausibly have been people — and including people who were *not* inhabitants of Uivar — who took the decisions to end house lives, including by burning. On the other hand, there is no need to dispute the general claim that people and houses were ‘entangled’ at Uivar and similar sites, though this may in the end be nothing more than an elaborate re-statement of the fact that houses were a central part of their culture and lifeways. Likewise, the resort to the operation of the total assemblage of people and things, rather than just individual constituents (Bennett 2010; DeLanda 2016), seems to us to run into the same objection. The Uivar houses certainly required care and maintenance, though in different ways through the sequence as materials changed. Houses of this time could in a sense have ‘invited’ burning (for all manner of motives), since in the right conditions they would have



been spectacularly combustible. But it is hard in the end to disagree with Barrett's point (2014, 69) about the indeterminacy of material agency or intra-activity.

Is there, finally, room for more compromise or accommodation between relational and historical approaches, as defined here? If we are right to assert that it is the people who choose to act in a particular way, do they nonetheless do so as part of some kind of human-material configuration? Should we follow Ingold (2013, 31; following Deleuze and Guattari 2004), and see both organic and non-organic entities as equally 'in life'? In a series of essays, Maurice Bloch (1998) has outlined how people in other settings, principally in Madagascar, appear not to think about the world in a linear, programmed fashion, but in a clumped, context-dependent manner; what people think may never quite be settled, as reflected in the 'long conversation that is Balinese society' in which 'at some time, one notion of time is used, and others, another' (Bloch 1977, 278). Analysing northern Cree hunters, Scott (2006, 51) has drawn attention to 'a melding of practical-empirical rationality with ethical and spiritual understandings'; as he poetically puts it, 'as the weft of experience entwines the warp of culturally available categories, narrative is the weaver' (Scott 2006, 51). Perhaps people at Uivar and similar sites of its context thought at times of their houses as alive, and perhaps the vitality and personality of houses were one constituent of the decision-making process and one thread in some of the stories they must have told about the birth and death not only of individual houses but also of tells as a whole. That is a case that has to be argued. But indeterminate entanglements, flows and meshworks do not seem to us to accommodate the full force and implications of the detailed and varied history of house and community in a tell settlement like Uivar, not just within the sequence but also at its beginning and at its end. The house provokes a clash of interpretive philosophies, and we vote for history; the lives of **houses** are key witnesses.

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