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**COMMENT ON KAROL SZYMCHAK'S REVIEW OF *ORIGINS OF AGRICULTURE IN WESTERN CENTRAL ASIA. AN ENVIRONMENTAL-ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY*, PHILADELPHIA 2010**

I welcome Karol Szymczak's detailed and appreciative review of my book and thank him for describing and evaluated it so thoroughly and fairly. When writing it I had three main aims: to provide a full account of the field work, analyses and results of the research project that I and my British, Russian and Turkmen colleagues carried out in Turkmenistan between 1989 and 1998; to introduce readers unfamiliar with western Central Asia to its environments and early prehistory; and to add to our understanding of how agriculture began in a large part of the vast Central Asian arid zone between the more comprehensively studied Southwest Asian and Chinese "fertile crescents". The book presents and weighs the evidence now available concerning the transition from hunting-and-gathering to agriculture and sedentary village life in the region. However, many of the details of how this great socio-economic change took place remain obscure and offer challenges for future research. The conclusions presented in the final two chapters of the book must therefore be tentative although – as Karol Szymczak kindly points out – I have sought in the *Synthesis* and *Conclusions* to differentiate clearly between "hard" evidence and speculation.

There is only one point in his review on which I wish to comment: his (correct) observation that our project would have benefited if more attention had been given to mobile artifacts (lithics and ceramics). It is true that in our research we were less concerned with these categories of evidence than with organic materials (plant and animal remains) and that more analyses of stone tools and pottery could have provided valuable data for interpretation, especially regarding inter-site contacts.

I regret the relative lack of such data in the book, which however arose from the particular characteristics of our international collaboration. As mentioned in the *Preface*, the original aim of the British participants in the project was to recover, identify and directly date organic remains from the Neolithic site of Jeitun to test the prevailing assumption that it was the oldest then known agricultural settlement in Central Asia. In the early years of the

project the British members of the team focused on this objective while our Russian colleagues added to previous studies they had made of stone tools and pottery from the site. This division of labour worked well initially but, after Turkmenistan became an independent nation in 1991, Russian participation gradually diminished. Many of the results of the Russian work are nevertheless incorporated into our interpretation of the site of Jeitun. Also, many of the Russian publications relating to lithic and ceramic evidence from Neolithic Turkmenistan, particularly those of G.F. Korobkova, are referred to and fully cited.

In the latter years of the project we did undertake some analyses of small assemblages of stone tools and pottery that we recovered at Jeitun (in 1994) and at the Bolshoi Balkhan sites (in 1997). These are reported in Sections 9.10, 9.11, 10.4 and 10.5 and include references to previous Russian research.

These changing circumstances through our decade of field work explain why lithic and ceramic evidence receives less attention than the organic remains, but I readily acknowledge that Karol Szymczak is right to draw attention to what is a weakness in the book. It also illustrates how political conditions can have unanticipated consequences for international collaborative projects. My greatest hope is that the book will stimulate further research on the many prehistoric sites in the region which await scientific investigation using modern techniques of excavation, dating and analysis of the material remains. This is the way forward if we are to gain a fuller understanding of the important role Central Asia has played in the early human settlement of Eurasia.

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