

Editorial

The first volume of *Bioarchaeology of the Near East* (BNE) was published ten years ago launching a new epoch in the history of bioarchaeological research in the region, as Jerome Rose has kindly indicated in his essay published in the current volume. Even if this is a courteous exaggeration, we have many reasons to celebrate as the journal has survived in an increasing crowded market of academic journals. Regardless of whether BNE is a niche venture with rather limited potential of growth, it appears as though it is still attractive for a small but stable group of authors and readers. Therefore, we move forward with optimism, being confident that over the next ten years we will be able to consistently reach the desired target of 5–7 regular papers per year.

Anniversaries are such events that encourage historical digressions and big words. Let us therefore start with some history. BNE was conceived in the early afternoon on 16th June, 2006 during a coffee break at the conference “Methods and Perspectives Applied to the Study of Food Practices in the Ancient Near East” in Venice, during my small talk with Theya Molleson and Holger Schutkowski when I shared with them the idea of establishing a new journal focusing on bioarchaeology of the Near East. Why not, they answered, perhaps immediately regretting these words, as they were quickly thereafter enlisted as the first members of the editorial board.

Although the name of the journal seems to be so obvious that it needs no explanation, it was established after a long and hard deliberation due to one problem: the journal had a forerunner that was called *Studies in Historical Anthropology* (SHA). Founded by Andrzej Wierciński and Alina Wiercińska in 2001, this journal was suspended after the first volume and eventually I was asked to take it over when Andrzej Wierciński passed away. From 2004–2006 we tried hard to renew SHA through the publication of three thematic volumes. One of them was about bioarchaeology of the Near East, with a special focus on Nemrik 9, a Pre-Pottery Neolithic site in Iraq. The first idea was to keep the name and the numbering of volumes (coinciding with the very suitable starting point in 2001, the first year of a new millennium), re-defining only the scope of the journal from general anthropology to regional bioarchaeology. However, there was a delay of three years and the title was quite misleading, so the final decision was to launch the new journal, keeping only some elements of style and inviting most members of the editorial board of SHA to transfer to BNE.

Over the past ten years of the journal's history there have been three subsequent epochs: an optimistic one when we expected fast success, hundreds of submissions every year and great fame, then a pessimistic one when the number of submitted publishable manuscripts was much lower than expected, and then a realistic one (that started some five years ago) when we realized that managing an academic journal is not an easy task, but slow progress gives some hope that our effort is not wasted, and keeps us moving forward.

During the past ten years, 62 manuscripts were submitted as regular papers, with 30 being published, which makes BNE's acceptance rate a bit below 50%. Along with regular papers, 36 short fieldwork reports and 10 book reviews were included, which equates to 7–8 items on average per volume. Among regular papers, seven discussed animal remains and two combined more than two lines of research, but the majority were dedicated to research on human remains. Plant remains were briefly discussed only in one paper, while archaeobotany has been, so far, virtually absent in the journal.

Regional diversity of topics discussed in the journal has been relatively high. Apart from five review or methodological texts there were seven original papers about Egypt, three about Armenia and Israel, two about Iraq and Syria and single papers about Cyprus, Greece, Iran, Jordan, Sudan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and United Arab Emirates. Among short fieldwork reports 13 were about Syria, 10 about Iran, three about Iraqi Kurdistan, two about Egypt, Israel, Kuwait and Turkey and single ones about Greece and India. Even if the distribution is not even, all parts of the Near East as defined in the first volume of the journal (i.e. the maximum extent of the Achaemenid Empire), have been covered during the past ten years. A high number of original papers concerning Egypt may be the consequence of the higher interest, not to mention greater volume of ongoing research by bioarchaeologists in this country as compared to other parts of the Near East, with possible exception of the Southern Levant.

In the past ten years BNE has slowly but consistently increased its visibility, with an average of 2130 visits to the journal webpage per year, and more than 50% of visitors downloading a paper. Most visitors represent North America and Europe, but 15% on average come from Near Eastern countries, which suggests that the journal may contribute to continued development of bioarchaeology in the region. Almost 1500 people subscribe to the journal through Facebook, along with 90 traditional subscribers.

On the journal's anniversary we sent a short survey to our authors, reviewers, and subscribers. Although only 26 respondents completed the survey, it is enough to have some insight into the reception of BNE by those who use it. One question concerned the importance of the journal for respondents: for one of them, BNE is not very important, for 10 somewhat important, and for 16 very important, which makes sure that accidental readers of the journal did not take part in the survey and that respondents represent a group of mostly engaged readers. Among respondents, there were 14 males and 12 females, 2 PhD students, 5 scholars within five years of PhD completion, and 19 more experienced scholars. Almost equal numbers of respondents learned about the journal from the Internet (nine) or from a colleague (eight), but noticeably five respondents were informed directly by the editors. Geographical distribution of respondents has been variable, with Europe (Poland, Greece, UK, Romania, Spain, Germany, France) represented by ten, North America (USA, Canada)

by five, and South-West Asia (Israel, Iran, India) by seven readers. We asked the respondents to define their main area of interest by no more than three keywords, those that have been enumerated more than once are: bioarchaeology (12), paleopathology (6), zooarchaeology (5), Near East (5), osteology (3), mortuary archaeology (3), Iran (2), ancient Egypt (2), odontology (2), physical anthropology (2), and archaeology (2). Such a pattern is fully in agreement with the profile of the journal.

Most respondents are frequent readers of the journal and have read more than one regular article (see Table 1). Short fieldwork reports are less frequently read on average, though this category of papers also has a relatively wide audience. This discrepancy is also visible in the number of downloads, which in the case of short fieldwork reports is ca. 50% lower on average than for regular papers.

Table 1. Number of papers from two categories read by respondents of the survey.

Papers	0	1	2–4	5–10	>10
Regular articles			7	9	9
Short fieldwork reports	1	2	12	6	5

Perhaps the most important feedback from the respondents was the evaluation of various aspects of the journal (Table 2). Open Access is decidedly the most appreciated by the readers, but also other important characteristics of the journal, such as technical edition, diversity of topics, readability of the web page, publication of short fieldwork reports, and general quality of the papers were evaluated as good or very good by most respondents. Only three aspects received lower averages. Quality of the book reviews and regularity of issuing new volumes has been estimated on average as a bit less than good. Given this feedback and the overall lack of readership, moving forward the BNE will likely cease publishing book reviews. The problem of publication regularity seems

Table 2. Mean evaluation of various aspects of the journal, scale from –2 (very poor) to +2 (very good), also with respect to the region (EU – Europe, AM – America, NE – Near East) and to importance of the journal to the respondent (S – not very/somewhat important, V – very important).

	N	Mean	Region			Importance	
			EU	AM	NE	S	V
Open Access	25	1.84	1.80	2.00	1.71	1.80	1.87
Technical aspects of the journal (layout, tables etc.)	25	1.28	1.40	1.60	1.17	1.18	1.36
Diversity of topics covered by the journal	25	1.24	1.40	1.40	0.67	1.10	1.33
Readability of the journal web page	26	1.23	1.50	1.20	1.14	1.09	1.50
Publication of short fieldwork reports	22	1.18	1.25	1.00	1.50	1.00	1.29
Quality of the papers	25	1.12	1.33	1.60	0.71	1.00	1.21
Quality of the book reviews	15	0.80	1.00	0.50	0.40	0.20	1.10
Regularity of issuing new volumes	24	0.75	1.12	0.40	0.57	0.70	0.79
Visibility of the journal to the potential readers	25	0.08	0.40	-0.20	0.14	-0.18	0.30

to be finally solved—during the first five years the manuscript flow was so low that volumes, especially the third and fourth, were published with long delay. However, since the fifth volume, all volumes have been published at a regular interval of once per year. Our aim now is to annually issue each volume of BNE in the early autumn.

The weakest aspect of the journal in the opinion of our readers is its visibility. Although BNE is indexed in a few well recognized databases, such as Scopus and EBSCO, the number of new academic journals and the growing mass of information flooding the Internet makes the journal relatively less and less visible for new readers. Traditional and even relatively new means of communication, including Facebook and an e-mail newsletter, have not been overly effective at reaching new readership. Therefore, following the suggestion of some respondents, the editorial team will work to develop more effective and targeted means of communication through scientific blogs and academic societies.

In the survey we also asked readers for suggestions regarding how the journal might be improved. Most of the received advice (6 respondents) concerned means to increase visibility of the journal, while two respondents suggested that the journal should be indexed on the Web of Science. This reality, however, may be a long way away, as the number of papers per volume is still too low and does not reach the required threshold. Other replies to this open question did not repeat and some means of improvement—such as introducing colour figures—have already been implemented, or do not depend on the editorial team (e.g. making review times shorter, or increasing the number of published papers). Therefore, the main focus for BNE in the near future will be to improve the visibility of the journal among potential readers.

Assuming that the readers of this editorial, with its numbers and enumerations, have given up and stopped reading, finally this is the place to reveal the secrets of the journal. BNE differs in two respects from other academic journals. First, we operate the journal with no budget and only the hosting of our webpage is provided by the University of Warsaw. All technical works, from copy editing, through technical edition and layout, to webmastering, is the contribution of three volunteer members of the editorial team. This makes us busy but also allows us to avoid some most obvious shortcomings of the Open Access. If authors pay to publish, the editors face the temptation of publishing less than perfect papers to earn more money. If an institution provides funds for the journal, there is a risk that the journal may be more or less directly forced into the realization of this institution's policy. In this respect we are completely free in managing the journal and—as our own effort is involved—we do our best to publish as many high quality papers as possible.

Second, if there are manuscripts submitted to BNE that do not meet our publication criteria but nonetheless include anything potentially interesting, novel, or worth disseminating, we support the authors as much as we can and work with them to draft

a publishable final copy. Some papers published in the journal have been strongly shaped by our copy editing. On one hand such a policy compromises the number of papers per volume as it is not very likely that we might work this way efficiently on more than a dozen regular articles per volume, but—on the other hand—it allows us to control the quality of papers in a more effective way than through peer review only. This is a good opportunity here to thank all external reviewers who accept such an editorial policy and we look forward to continuing to work with authors to publish new and interesting details about ongoing and completed bioarchaeological research from all corners and cultural contexts of the ancient Near East.

That's all for the moment, more big words soon—when we celebrate the 20th anniversary of BNE.

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