“Scaling up: Epipalaeolithic and early Neolithic networks and material identities”

The shift from a mobile hunting-and-gathering way of life to a more sedentary, village-based and ultimately agricultural lifestyle necessarily involved dramatic changes in social interaction, organization and identity, both at the group and individual level. In this talk I will discuss the potential of methods derived from network science and especially social network analysis for a new perspective on these changes. Analyses of a database of material culture from more than 500 sites from across the Near East at this time demonstrate some significant temporal trends in inter-group interaction over the course of this period, and highlight the fundamental significance of material culture to personal and group identity at this time. I will discuss the relationship between material culture and social change at this time, and also consider whether these developments are unique to the Epipalaeolithic and early Neolithic, or whether the incorporation of material culture into social networks began much earlier and potentially helped shape the course of human evolution.

Fiona Coward is a Senior Lecturer in Archaeology and Anthropology at Bournemouth University, UK. Her work focuses on the multidisciplinary study of the evolution of human social life and cognition from the very earliest hominins through to the development of early village societies. In particular, she is interested in how and why humans were able to scale up their social lives from the very small social groups we lived in for much of our prehistory to the global social networks which characterise people’s lives today. Fiona earned her PhD in Palaeolithic Archaeology from the University of Southampton. She is a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute and an associate editor for the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*.