



Book Reviews

TRYPILLIA MEGA-SITES AND EUROPEAN PREHISTORY 4100–3400 BCE. EDITED BY JOHANNES MÜLLER, KNUT RASSMANN AND MYKHAILO VIDEIKO (THEMES IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHAEOLOGY, VOLUME 2)

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The European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) launched its series *Themes in Contemporary Archaeology* in 2015 with the goal of providing ‘cutting edge summaries of areas of debate in current archaeological enquiry’. The topic of the second volume was an excellent choice since it offers a comprehensive survey of recent advances in the research of Ukrainian and Moldavian Trypillia/Trypolje sites, many of which are still surrounded by an aura of exotic mystery. This topic, which was earlier ‘ignored for many years’, as noted by the publishers, has most certainly become one of the focal subjects of mainstream archaeological discourse as shown by the many research projects, conferences and studies devoted to Trypillia mega-sites. While a review of one of the first compendia of studies on this subject in English noted that with the exception of one single contributor, ‘no Western scholars are included’ (Anthony 2015), this is no longer the case. In addition to the region’s Ukrainian, Moldavian and Romanian specialists, several international research projects have been launched by research institutions based in Kyiv, Kiel, Durham and Frankfurt for exploring the significance of mega-sites, underpinning the European significance of the Trypillia/Trypolje sites and providing an excellent illustration of the fact that the study and interpretation of Europe’s prehistory is a joint task that can best be accomplished through the broad collaboration of European institutions and scholars. It is therefore of particular significance that the volume was published by EAA, a European organisation whose declared mission is to promote the exchange of archaeological information across borders. The present volume essentially covers the research findings of the ‘Human Development in Landscapes’ project undertaken by the Graduate School in Kiel, with some sections devoted to an overview of the most important results of archaeological investigations by research teams from Kyiv and Durham, leading to the birth of a comprehensive survey that illustrates the importance of collaborative research. (I first leafed through this volume when I attended the closing conference, *Early urbanism in prehistoric Europe?: the case of the Tripillia mega-sites*, of the AHRC project in St Chad’s College in Durham, in spring 2016).

The Introduction by Johannes Müller and Knut Rassman clearly defines the types of sites that are in the focus of the volume: mega-sites are sites whose size exceeds c. 150 ha as well as sites, which in comparison to other contemporary sites are at least ‘10 times larger than the next smaller ones’.

The book explores various dimensions of the relevance of Trypillia mega-sites for European prehistory in 18 chapters, organised into five larger sections. The volume is rounded off with a very helpful Index of Places and an Index of Subjects, both compiled by René Ohlrau.

Chapters 1 and 2 in the first section outline the broad cultural and chronological framework of the mega-sites. The first addresses the issue of why the early, unexpected appearance of this demographic and social agglomeration in the north Pontic is unique from a European perspective (Johannes Müller), while the second offers an overview of the main milestones in the study of the Trypillian mega-sites from 1899 onward (Mykhailo Videjko and Knut Rassmann).

The studies in the second section focus on the advances made in the archaeology of mega-sites based on the findings of research projects targeting particular sites. While these extensive sites can hardly be completely excavated, improvements in non-destructive survey techniques can nevertheless provide an increasingly accurate picture of their extent and structured spatial organisation. These include aerial archaeology, which was pioneered from the 1960s, and the relatively more recent introduction of geophysics that brought a genuine methodological revolution (Chapman *et al.* 2014). Chapters 3 and 4 present case studies of Ukrainian (Knut Rassmann, Aleksey Korvin-Piotrovskiy, Mykhailo Videiko and Johannes Müller) and Moldavian sites (Knut Rassmann, Patrick Mertl, Hans-Ulrich Voss, Veaceslav Bicbaiev and Alexandru Popa and Sergiu Musteață) and describe how the use of high-resolution geomagnetic devices can yield a wealth of detailed data, surpassing by far the information gained from earlier surveys. In a few cases, it proved possible to conduct excavations in a handful of promising locations identified during the geophysical surveys, as for example at Maidanetske, where two houses were uncovered (Johannes Müller and Mykhailo Videiko). The interpretation of the archaeological record remains controversial in many cases; several plausible explanations can be proposed for the seemingly objective observations on a particular feature. One case in point is a large building selected for excavation at Nebelivka based on the geophysical anomalies that was uncovered jointly by the British and Ukrainian team. The interpretation of the excavated building differs substantially: one team believes it had functioned as a temple (Natalia Burdo and Mykhailo Videiko), the other argues for a role as an assembly house (John Chapman, Bisserka Gaydarska and Duncan Hale). Chapter 8 looks at the most prominent sites not only in terms of their spatial dimensions, but also in terms of their chronology, based on the 35 new radiometric dates for Maidanetske and the 282 earlier ones (Johannes Müller, Robert Hofmann, Lennart Brandstätter, René Ohlrau and Mykhailo Videiko).

Grouped in the third section are the studies addressing questions of the economy of these enormous settlements as well as the social organisation and ideology of their occupants. This aspect was lacking from earlier overviews (Anthony 2015). Chapter 9 covers the environmental history of the western Pontic region during the fourth millennium BC, a period during which the human transformation of the environment is clearly attested (Wiebke Kirleis and Stefan Dreibrodt). The economy of these sites based on plant and animal exploitation is discussed in Chapter 11 (Wiebke Kirleis and Marta Dal Corso). The population estimates of the mega-sites are based on the traces of the one-time occupants' building activities and the spatial distribution of settlements (curiously enough, no burials are known from this period). In Chapter 10, Aleksandr Diachenko suggests several models of demographic estimates. The next logical question concerns the carrying capacity of Trypillian sites – given the complexity of this issue, the model proposed in Chapter 12 represents but one possible avenue of future studies in this field (René Ohlrau, Marta Dal Corso, Wiebke Kirleis and Johannes Müller). Chapter 13 reviews the pottery kilns uncovered on Trypillian sites that shed light on daily life and craft activities on these mega-settlements; the archaeological evidence indicates that the high-quality, elaborately ornamented ceramic vessels were produced in high numbers (Aleksey Korvin-Piotrovskiy, Robert Hofmann, Knut Rassmann, Mykhailo Yu Videiko and Lennart Brandstätter). Chapter 14 explores the social organisation behind the buildings and the architectural traits of the spatial configurations at the Maidanetske site. The structured spatial organisation would suggest that 'the term proto-urbanism might be adequate' for describing these mega-sites (Johannes Müller, Robert Hofmann and René Ohlrau).

Chapter 15, the first study in the fourth section, addresses issues of collapse, decline and transformation, of why and how giant-settlements declined and were supplanted by a network of smaller settlements during the Late Trypillia period (Aleksandr Diachenko). The comparison of Mesopotamia and Eastern Europe has always been one of the favourite exercises of European prehistoric studies (see for example, the studies on literacy and writing). Broadening the European perspective outlined at the beginning of the volume, Chapter 16 compares the Trypillian mega-sites to the settlements of the Uruk period, one of the most oft-cited parallels – however, the detailed comparison reveals that aside from formal similarities, there are no other shared elements between the settlements of the Uruk period and the mega-sites of the southern Buh and Dnipro region, which were essentially rural settlements (Johannes Müller and

Susan Pollock). (This is one of the reasons that I would discard the label 'proto-urbanism' for the Trypillian mega-sites.)

The two studies of the volume's final section lead to the present. Chapter 17 looks at whether the concept of low-density urbanism as defined by Roland Fletcher (2009) can be applied to prehistoric mega-sites (John Chapman and Bisserka Gaydarska). Chapter 18, the final study in this volume, offers a synthesis of the findings of the many projects targeting the Trypillia mega-sites that can act as springboards for future studies (Johannes Müller). What seems certain is that Trypillian settlements can be described as well-planned and structured mega-sites, some with a population of as many as 10,000 people, that were occupied relatively briefly, for no more than some 150 years. These were visibly rural, peaceful, non-hierarchic societies whose sense of cohesion was perhaps reinforced by shared experiences of feasting, and whose existence was in part based on certain technological changes in transport and specialisation in pottery production. At the same time, a number of unanswered questions remain (Menotti 2016): how and why did mega-sites evolve, how were they sustained, what were their cultural and other contacts, and why were mega-sites eventually abandoned? Where are the men and women who planned, built and occupied these sites, and who made the elaborately decorated vessels? Where are the remains of the animals that were consumed and used for traction? Can the Trypillia mega-sites be linked to the general issue of early urbanisation or should we discard the 'urban concept' and search for an entirely new approach (eg, Gaydarska 2016)? The spate of new questions seems endless...

A recurring theme in several chapters is the problem of demography. This is quite understandable, given that this is one of the most spectacular elements linking the prehistoric Trypillia world with our own age. What insights can the study of the fourth millennium BC offer regarding the management of the over-population of certain regions and the solutions that can be successfully applied as well as in terms of the potential alternatives to societies based on social pyramids? One of the greatest merits of the volume is that it does not restrict its scope to the newest research findings, but opens new avenues of research by contextualising the Trypillia mega-site phenomenon and by exploring its relevance for the present, raising thereby a new spate of archaeological questions.

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