



## Book Reviews

### **CROSSING THE ALPS: EARLY URBANISM BETWEEN NORTHERN ITALY AND CENTRAL EUROPE (900–400 BC) EDITED BY LORENZO ZAMBONI, MANUEL FERNÁNDEZ-GÖTZ AND CAROLA METZNER-NEBELSICK**

*Sidestone Press, Leiden. 2020. 436pp, 219 illustrations, hb, ISBN 978-90-962-7 (€185.00). Available to read online for free via the publisher's website*

This stimulating book fills a major gap in the literature on Iron Age urbanism. In Europe, the rise of urban centres has been viewed primarily through the prism of the Classical world, with research focused on the archetypal city state societies of Greece, Etruria and Latium, and on Greek colonies overseas. According to the conventional model, urban settlements – in the guise of fortified *oppida* and other large agglomerations – did not appear in temperate Europe until the final centuries BC and even then were a pale reflection of their southern neighbours. The short-lived Hallstatt D *Fürstensitze* (princely sites) that emerged in the 6th century BC north of the Alps, such as the Heuneburg in south-west Germany and Vix-Mont Lassois in eastern France, were long deemed too small to be urban, their rise and fall in any case driven by their close links with Mediterranean societies. Northern Italy, meanwhile, has rarely figured in discussions of early European urbanism, with urban status denied to the large late Bronze Age aggregations in the Po plain, whilst Iron Age centres such as Felsina (Bologna), Marzabotto and Spina were typically assimilated to greater Etruria, as offshoots, colonies or trading stations.

The present book originated in a meeting held in 2019 in Milan to compare earlier Iron Age urbanisation processes on both sides of the Alps and explore the role of inter-regional interaction in the emergence of more complex social forms. Given everything that has intervened since – and we cannot forget that northern Italy was hit both very early and very hard by the pandemic –

the editors are to be congratulated on achieving this publication in less than two years. Its 26 papers represent a good selection of those presented in Milan. As these show, previous orthodoxies about protohistoric European urbanism must be discarded. New research projects have revealed that several Hallstatt *Fürstensitze* were more extensive and heavily populated than we thought, whilst the burgeoning evidence generated by development-led interventions on both sides of the Alps points to multiple settlement trajectories during the earlier Iron Age, which do not seem to conform to any one template of urban development.

The papers are divided into four thematic blocks. Part 1 comprises three scene-setting chapters preceded by a short introduction, where among other things the editors explore the scholarly barriers that have hitherto prevented the north Italian evidence from receiving the consideration it warrants; obstacles range from the peripheral status accorded to the Po basin by the Italian Classical archaeological tradition, to the differing typo-chronologies and start dates for the Iron Age on opposite sides of the Alps. Mark Pearce provides a neat study in why period boundaries have hindered our understanding. Rather than adopting definitions of urbanism grounded in the Classical world, Pearce suggests that we would do better to look to medieval towns as an apt analogy for protohistoric Europe. If we do, then not only does the important late Bronze Age site at Frattesina in the Po Basin meet most of the relevant criteria, but more to the point, so do some of the extensive aggregations (*terremarre*) that emerged here in the 2nd millennium BC. Definitions of urbanism are discussed further by Manuel Fernández-Götz, who emphasises the variability and cyclicity of the phenomenon, arguing for a nuanced approach to the archaeological evidence, sensitive to the particular cultural and temporal context.

Rounding Part 1 off is a fascinating essay by Louis and Carola Metzner-Nebelsick. They imagine a journey over the Alps around 600 BC, starting on the Ligurian coast at Genoa – its role as a gateway to Hallstatt Europe from the 10th century BC onward has, they argue, been underestimated – and ending at the Danube. They examine the sites and communities that the traveller would have encountered and consider the consequences of the passage of goods and ideas for peoples along the way. The adoption in the western Hallstatt sphere of costumes fastened with Italian-style brooches extended to the symbolism inherent in this new dress code,

since men and women wore these accessories in the correct gender-specific ways. A striking outcome of recent research is the hard evidence for developed communication infrastructure by the 7th century BC, attested by tree-ring dates from a series of bridges and causeways in the Alpine area. Although the Alps are often cast as a barrier to interaction, well-maintained Transalpine routes existed and were in regular use.

Part 2 is devoted to Iron Age urbanism in and around the Po Basin; these 13 chapters represent the core of the book, most focusing on individual sites or offering regional overviews. From an analysis of bronze axe production and consumption, Cristiano Iaia identifies two distinct trans-regional networks in the 8th and 7th centuries BC, when many north Italian urban sites first emerged. One network was centred on north-east Italy and the Transalpine Hallstatt zone, the other on Etruria and the southern Po plain; Felsina and Verucchio were key nodes in this second system. Several papers reassess the textbook towns of the region, using evidence from modern excavations and surveys, among them Adria, Felsina, Marzabotto, Spina, Verucchio and the peri-Alpine complexes at Castelletto Ticino-Sesto Calende-Golasecca, Como and Milan. Other chapters put flesh on centres about which relatively little has previously been published in the Anglophone literature – at least as far as this reviewer is aware – some only identified fairly recently (Forcello, Parre), others known about from antiquarian/rescue excavations or chance finds and now given context by modern research projects (Bergamo, Coazze, Oppeano).

These studies add significantly to our understanding of urban pathways in northern Italy. The overriding picture is one of diversity. Occupied areas (excluding cemeteries, which were often separated from the inhabited areas by water) vary from a few hectares (Adria, Spina) to around 200 ha (Como, Felsina). Some early Iron Age centres occupy elevated positions, others are on ridges beside rivers, or sit in the Po plain, drained by grids of canals (Forcello, Spina). Only a minority were definitely enclosed or defended (Felsina, Oppeano, Verucchio) or had a separate acropolis (Marzabotto). Public buildings have been identified at a few sites. By far the most spectacular is the 8th-century BC monumental structure, with hundreds of timber posts and over 120 m long, excavated in 1998–99 at the Piazza VIII Agosto at Felsina – just beyond the contemporary Villanovan wooden walls; on analogy with the *Saepta* at Rome, Jacopo Ortali

suggests that it may have been used for assemblies, voting, or was the endpoint of religious processions held outside the walls. A range of domestic structures are also attested, some in stone (Como, Verucchio), others built of timber (Forcello), notably the exceptionally well-preserved 6th-century BC house-workshop at Adria described by Simonetta Bonomi *et al.*

Occupation trajectories are also variable, with some sites continuously inhabited for centuries and exhibiting various phases of reorganisation, but others only short-lived. Having been one of many Italian sites that grew rapidly into a major centre at the start of the Iron Age, Verucchio went into a sudden (and as yet unexplained) decline in the 7th century BC. Paolo Rondini and Lorenzo Zamboni propose that this is an Italian example of the 'delicate urbanism' – to use Simon Stoddart's term – exhibited by Hallstatt *Fürstensitze* as north of the Alps. A second wave of nucleation is apparent in the Po Basin during the 6th and 5th centuries BC, when many smaller sites like Adria, Forcello or Spina that played a role in exchange networks between the Mediterranean and central Europe were founded. Inasmuch as any one theme emerges as common to all these centres, it is their engagement in long-distance trade, some with contacts extending as far as the Baltic (Verucchio); intensive artisanal activity is also attested at several sites (Adria, Marzabotto, Oppeano).

In Part 3, the focus shifts to beyond the Alps. Chapters by Dirk Krausse *et al.* on the Heuneburg and by Bruno Chaume on Vix-Mont Lassois review how renewed research has transformed our understanding of both sites. Much of this work has been published in detail elsewhere, but both papers add new elements. The burial of a well-connected elite woman discovered at Bettenbühl across the Danube from the Heuneburg, is tree-ring dated to 583 BC, is one of the earliest rich Hallstatt female burials; several objects including a horse chamfron indicate links with the area south of the Alps, and the contents also include seven bracelets made of Dorset shale. Chaume presents the accumulating evidence at Vix for a fortified settlement and port by the river Seine, where an apsidal building resembling those on the summit of Mont Lassois has been pinpointed by geophysical survey. Whilst the number of (permanent) inhabitants at these sites remains a matter of hot debate – see the special section on the population of the Heuneburg in *Germania* 97 (2019) – their scale and socio-economic complexity clearly places them on a par with other

leading centres of the period in northern Italy and the Classical world, separated by an artificial disciplinary divide rather than by substantive differences in their archaeology.

The remaining chapters in Part 3 examine a selection of other Hallstatt centres, from the long-lived Slovenian site at Most na Soči (Snežana Tecco Hvala) to the emergent salt emporium at the Dürrnberg in the Austrian Alps (Holger Wendling). Connections between Bohemia and northern Italy are evident in the 7th century BC (Miloslav Chytráček), when the settlement pattern was dominated by 'aristocratic' enclosures, with the larger fortified sites such as Závist-Lhota and Záhořice-Vladař, comparable to those elsewhere in Transalpine Europe, emerging in the 6th and 5th centuries BC. At Bourges in central France, the early settlement core is deeply buried beneath the modern city and very partially known, but development-led inventions beyond the promontory have revealed a remarkable spread of settlement activity, characterised by intensive craft and industry, and rich burials (Ian Ralston), in all extending to perhaps 1.5 km<sup>2</sup>. In southern Germany, the development of the 'princely' centre at Mount Ipf at the expense of the nearby hillfort at the Goldberg (Rüdiger Krause) offers an interesting contrast to the Heuneburg, 100 kilometres to the south-west.

The book is completed by two well-judged commentaries by Corinna Riva and Simon Stoddart, both of whom have worked on urbanisation in central Italy. Their contributions examine many of the issues at the heart of the debate on early European urbanism, from the perspective of both Classical archaeology and European protohistory. As Riva emphasises, it is time to shift our attention away from questions of urban origins and instead focus on the social, economic and environmental consequences inherent in Iron Age urbanisation processes – a point on which this reviewer enthusiastically concurs and also touched on by Fernández-Götz in his chapter.

Given the high quality of the papers, it seems churlish to level any criticisms. The lack of a chapter devoted to Genoa is a pity, given its importance as a gateway to Transalpine Europe. Equally, despite the presence of Greek colonies along the French Mediterranean coast (or even because of them?), a characterisation of Iron Age urbanism in this zone would have made an instructive contrast with northern Italy and the Hallstatt sphere, and completed the Transalpine 'circle'. A

survey of leading sites in central Italy might have offered another valuable perspective, and there is clearly more to be said about the interplay of long-distance interactions and trade, population aggregation, and increasing social complexity as cause and effect in early Iron Age urbanisation processes; these are touched through the book, but could perhaps have been profitably brought together.

These few points apart, *Crossing the Alps* succeeds admirably in its core aims of characterising the variability of early Iron Age urbanism beyond the Classical world and in anchoring northern Italy into the wider European picture. Overall, the book is nicely produced and amply illustrated, with just occasional editorial infelicities and typos. It should be required reading for any serious student of Iron Age urbanism, whilst the publisher's enlightened decision to make the volume free-to-read online will ensure that it reaches the widest possible audience.

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*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the  
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