



## Book Reviews

### **ALONG THE RIVERS AND THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS. A REVISED CHRONO-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE SOUTH-WESTERN BALKANS DURING THE LATE 3RD AND EARLY 2ND MILLWNNIUM BCE BY MAJA GORI**

*DR. Rudolf Habelt. 2015. 392 pp, 86 illustrations, 110 plates. ISBN 978-3-7749-3963-9, pb, €84*

Writing a review of this book raised a real personal dilemma. On the one hand, led by identical first-hand experience, I felt an almost physical appreciation of the painstaking efforts, and perhaps frustration at times, of M. Gori as she visited museum collections, negotiated with many local archaeologists and/or authorities, processed the selected material of two sites, coped with situations beyond her control (eg, large volumes of unpublished material), collected all available information for the study area and study period in the hope of producing a comprehensive overview of the state of the art, while offering some new and very interesting data. On the other hand, equally vividly I felt compelled to disagree with the proliferation of this type of study in the 21st century that, intentionally or not, and despite all the caveats when dealing with old excavations, continuously promotes a comparative relative chronology with the occasional radiocarbon date in the background to put some 'flesh' on the bone. Perhaps the latter assessment would not have been so harsh if the title of the book did not contain 'a revised chrono-cultural framework....'. A better title matching the content would have been 'an updated distribution pattern of selected pottery shapes'.

The book consists of 12 chapters. A skewed introduction, that barely suggests the aims and objectives of the research, is followed by a weak chapter on absolute chronology (Chapter 5) and four solid chapters providing details about the principal site of this research – the multi-stage settlement of Sovjan in Albania; stratigraphy and general information about the site (Chapter 2); methodology and formal pottery typology (Chapters 3 and 4); data analysis, named 'typical features and relative chronology' (Chapter 6). The next chapter concerns the second principal study site, that of Sveta Nedela in Republic of Macedonia, which is mired in so many uncertainties that what is developed in 150 pages for Sovjan, here has taken mere 24. The following four chapters (8–11) are basically gazetteers of sites (potentially contemporary to Sovjan and/or Sveta Nedela) in all the neighbouring states, intended to finding parallels in ceramic shapes which are then used to revise the relative chronology of the sites. The last chapter does exactly what it says on the tin – 'distribution patterns and interaction networks', that given the lack of concluding chapter could have been slightly longer than the current three pages and expanding more on the implications of the very interesting trends noted in the chapter.

The book is data-rich and as far as the two main sites are concerned contains well-illustrated material (1153 potsherds from Sovjan and 353 from Sveta Nedela). It also has useful data (eg, the distribution of certain artefact-types, such as violin-shaped figurines) and sometimes intriguing information (eg, the primary ovine burial in Tumulus 10 in Apollonia, Albania) that is 'hidden' in the somewhat repetitive description of sites, aimed at pointing parallels and correlations. However, the role of the exhaustive list of settlements (Chapters 8–11) in the book is questionable, especially for those sites that could not be linked to the two study sites – Sovjan and Sveta Nedela.

The research presented in this volume illustrates a typical situation in Balkan archaeology, where there is an overwhelming amount of material, not all published, but nevertheless organized in an 'enchained' relative chronology with few radiocarbon dates to pinpoint time in an absolute scale. Thus, the core premise of the research – creating chronology and synchronization on the basis of pottery shapes is not only taken for granted and not mentioned at all but there seem to be no awareness that the way forward to refine the Bronze Age chronology of the region is not the proliferation of relative chronologies backed by few radiocarbon dates that are 'stretched' to cover the entire study area but the other way round – striving to generate new series of AMS dates from as many sites as possible, with the parallels between the pots from the various sites then used to measure the pace of distribution of any given form.

One can sympathise with M. Gori that she was constrained by the available material, lack of samples and/or funding for radiocarbon dating and did her best at least to publish her meticulous research. What was in her power, however, was the formulation of an overarching research theme that unites the fragmentary and patchy data over a rather wide region. In a contemporary climate of competitive funding where defining 'big research questions' is key to promote our discipline, the lack of clear objectives for this type of investigation is truly worrying.

This is even more so, since it is evident that M. Gori is acquainted with recent advances in Bronze Age studies and has offered some interesting, albeit very short, discussions, such as the cultural meaning of bronze daggers and axes (p. 221) or the creation of ritual landscapes (p. 235). Another potentially valuable point that could have been developed is the emerging pattern of preference for wetland settlements that even before the discovery of Must Farm

(UK) was clear through Balkan sites such as Sovjan and Demir Kapija. Last but not least are the fascinating insights brought up in the last chapter that are sketched in rather than fully explored (for example, network theory is only mentioned in a footnote). Hence, overlapping networks are indeed a plausible pattern of social interaction in the study area in the third–second millennia BC but it is poorly defined and comes as a surprise after ten chapters of traditional description.

Overall, the execution of the book is very good but better links between the chapters would have benefitted the flow of the narrative. There are also some issues of presentation – eg, some figures have scales, others do not; the plans and cross-sections are too small for anyone interested in stratigraphic details.

The evaluation of this volume depends on what one expects from the book – if you are looking for a digest of information, supplemented by a robust method of pottery typology, then this is certainly the book for you. If, however, you are seeking new insights about the third–second millennia BC in the south-western Balkans, then the content will be a disappointment for you.

In sum, the book is a diligent doctoral thesis that should have been edited before publication as a monograph to bring forward the implications of this otherwise very useful research.

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