



## Book Reviews

### **ASPECTS OF THE BRONZE AGE IN THE ATLANTIC ARCHIPELAGO AND BEYOND: PROCEEDINGS FROM THE BELFAST BRONZE AGE FORUM 9–10 NOVEMBER 2013 EDITED BY DIRK BRANHDERM**

*Curach bhán publications, Hagen. 2019. 404 pp, 219 B&W and col figs, 27 tables, hb, ISBN: 978-3-942002-29-5, €75.00*

This is a collection of 21 high-quality studies in which anyone interested in the European Bronze Age is going to find something interesting. Most of these studies were presented at the Belfast Bronze Age Forum conference in 2013. As this event was six years before the volume was published, unfortunately, two contributions (far less than one may first imagine) have lost part of their relevance. These contributions are: a report about the project AEMA (Atlantic Europe in the Metal Ages) that ended in 2016 and which led to the creation of an open-access database<sup>1</sup> of archaeological and linguistic evidence from Atlantic Europe; and Robert Alan Williams' preliminary results from his impressive research regarding the distribution of copper from the Welsh mine at the Great Orme to the Continent (for the latest results from his research see Williams & Veslud 2019).

The other 19 contributions are up-to-date first-rate studies which focus on various types of evidence, regions and aspects of the Bronze Age. They are discussed in relation to the two current most important and most competing paradigms regarding the European Bronze Age (Fontijn 2019, 13); Kristian Kristiansen's 'political economy' and Joanna Brück's 'moral economy'. Evidently, the classification of any of the contributions in this review does not mean that their authors are necessarily in favour of these paradigms.

Regarding Kristian Kristiansen's 'political economy', several contributions focus on two important elements from this approach regarding Bronze Age societies: the production and distribution of copper and the appearance of a new aggressive and elitist lifestyle. William O'Brien presents evidence that shows how a new copper mine in Southwest Ireland could have been the main supplier of metal to the island between the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. Similarly, Simon Timberlake and Peter Marshall review the history of Bronze Age mining in the British Isles; an ambitious endeavour that they carried out brilliantly. Nevertheless, besides the fact that these two

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aemap.ac.uk/>

contributions are exemplary studies of the chronological and technical aspects surrounding mining, there lacks a certain discussion regarding the socio-economic conditions behind this activity in the areas and periods under study. Does the evidence point towards self-organised mining communities or full-time workers (slaves?) exploited by an undetermined category of people (Kienlin 2013, 422)? In any case, their results strongly suggest that raw materials circulated for long distances; an important element in political economy approaches to the Bronze Age (Kristiansen & Earle 2014, 241).

Another important element in the political economy approaches to the European Bronze Age is the proliferation of warriorlike identities. In the volume under discussion, this important topic is partially addressed in two contributions by David Bell and Ros Ó Maoldúin, who analyse the use-wear of a large corpus of Early Bronze Age European halberds (including the evidence of wounds inflicted by these weapons) and several Early Bronze Age razors from Ireland and Scotland, respectively. To simplify, they conclude that these items were used by members of 'elite fraternities' or 'champions' (the term 'warrior' is avoided) to differentiate themselves from the rest of society. Evidently, this kind of evidence does not necessarily mean (in my opinion) that male chiefs ruled society at the time (Brück & Fontijn 2013).

The bulk of the contributions, however, focus on topics which fall under areas traditionally of no interest for political economy approaches to the Bronze Age. For example, three of the contributions analyse two elements that are traditionally associated with the Neolithic period (lithics and megalithic burials) but that still existed in the Bronze Age. This suggests that the border between these two periods was blurred and that metalwork did not necessarily mark the beginning of an epoch that was radically different from other prehistoric periods (Kristiansen & Earle 2014). Katherine Sawyer presents new radiocarbon dates regarding communal megalithic burials in the Isles of Scilly in Southwest Britain which show that some burial sites were still used in the Bronze Age. Similarly, Andrew Fitzpatrick and Linda Bouteille study, in two different contributions, the role of stone implements in metalworking; focusing on the early metallurgy of the British Isles and the lithic tools used for metalworking recovered in Britain and Ireland between the Bell Beaker period and the Late Bronze Age, respectively.

Other contributions critically address the prevailing view that the Bronze Age was an epoch during which a minority (usually male warrior chiefs) ruled hierarchical societies and controlled the production of goods (Brück & Fontijn 2013). Rachel Crellin reanalyses the introduction of new elements of material culture to the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea during the transition between the Late Neolithic period and the Bronze Age. She interprets these changes as being the result of the selective assimilation of foreign influences to local traditions and criticises the original interpretation that viewed these transformations as being the result of a new Bronze Age elite. In

a similar way, Tobias Mörtz suggests, based on the distribution and context of sword casting moulds from Britain, that metal production may not have been a centralised manufacturing system controlled by a 'privileged group of people'.

The last group of contributions analyses the Bronze Age from a perspective which is far from political economy approaches and instead studies this period from the viewpoint of the prehistoric people; focusing on identity, landscapes and metal hoarding. In three contributions, James O'Driscoll, Alan Hawkes and David Mullin analyse how communities employed different elements of the landscape (hillforts, burnt mounds and quarries, respectively) to create an identity and/or past for the group while linking the community to specific areas (Bradley 2002). Moreover, in two different contributions, Martin Rundkvist, Oliver Dietrich and Tobias Mörtz study the logic or 'average behaviour' (Fontijn 2019, 22) behind metalwork hoarding. Dietrich and Mörtz analyse the practice of inserting items inside socketed axes prior to their deposition in the Carpathian Basin, Britain and Ireland. Rundkvist presents a simple yet potentially extremely useful idea. If the various types of Bronze Age metal artefacts were hoarded in specific places and combinations following identifiable patterns, a large-scale study of an area could unveil these patterns and allow future archaeologists to know where to look for metal hoards during the surveying of nearby areas.

Finally, there are a few important contributions whose topic of research is not directly related to the current debates surrounding the nature of the European Bronze Age. Dirk Brandherm makes a historiographical analysis of the 'Atlantic Bronze Age' concept with an emphasis on the changing definition of this term. Arguably, this is the most important contribution to this topic since the congress 'Is there an Atlantic Bronze Age?' (Jorge 1998). Finally, Sabine Gerloff and Brendan O'Connor present an unpublished paper by Christopher Hawkes about the chronology of Bronze Age Britain that should have been published in *Antiquity* in 1980. Regarding this interesting contribution, I personally wish it had a more detailed and critical comparison between Hawkes' proposal and current chronological debates about the Bronze Age in Britain.

In conclusion, while the 21 contributions of this edited volume focus on different regions, aspects and periods of the Bronze Age, their analysis and conclusions are an excellent reflection of the current state of affairs in European Bronze Age studies. Arguably, this field is approaching a crossroads at which important decisions about its future need to be taken. Are big databases with multi-regional scopes better than local studies which focus on a few contexts? Was the Bronze Age a continuation of a Neolithic period characterised by unranked societies that should be studied from an emic approach or was it a distinct epoch marked by chiefdoms ruled by aristocratic warrior leaders? Volumes like this one are already playing an important role in the process of deciding which approach and interpretation of the Bronze Age period will dominate the field in the following decades. Could it be a combination of both?

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