The ‘culture’ of El Argar in southeast Spain owed its initial presentation in European Bronze Age studies to two Belgian mining engineers, Louis and Henri Siret, in the 1880s. In the one hundred and thirty years since the Sirets’ pioneering excavations, the Argaric has been cited in most major European publications as a key example of social, economic and political development during the Early Bronze Age. It has also been cited as an example of a more ‘complex’ society and has been included in comparative studies of social evolution in Europe and North America. The aims of the authors of this book are (1) to introduce the reader to both the evidence and the interpretations of the Argaric, (2) to make this information available in English to an international audience via a major book publisher and (3) to criticize and propose alternatives to what the authors view as ‘dominant narratives’ in Argaric studies.

The authors begin with a summary of the history of research on the Argaric from the 1880s through to the present day, followed by a presentation of the distribution of Argaric society in time and space, showing how targeted programmes of AMS C14 dating have produced the most intensively studied cultural sequence for the Early Bronze Age in the central and west Mediterranean. The chapter on ‘Argaric landscapes’ gives the reader an overview of settlements and settlement patterns, including the internal structure of these settlements and their social, political and economic significance, as well as land use, palaeoclimate and palaeoenvironments. This is followed by consideration of the production, distribution and consumption of food (stockbreeding, agriculture), metallurgy, pottery, stone, bone, vegetable fibres, shell and clay. Next is a chapter presenting the different lines of evidence on funerary rituals: the containers, grave goods, intra-settlement contexts and inter-settlement variation, as well as the palaeodemography, health, activity patterns, mobility and diet of the dead individuals, and what these tell us about the nature of society and social change in the Argaric. Lastly the authors confront the big issue of the political system of the Argaric (chiefdom? state-like?) and what they call the ‘new narratives’ of gender, childhood, commensality rituals and warfare (or not) in the Argaric: these issues have been the subject of a series of papers by the authors during the last decade.

There is no doubt that this book does present to the reader who is not an Argaric, or a West Mediterranean specialist, the evidence and interpretations of this important area and period of later prehistory. There are helpful illustrations of sites and materials, as well as extensive list of references at the end of each chapter (although these would have been more user-friendly if grouped together in one list at the end of the volume) and the English is excellent. The ‘reappraisal’ of Argaric research in chapter 1 would have been improved by inclusion of the ‘heterogenous approaches and interpretations’ (as well as research projects and publications) that, according to the authors characterise their third historical period c.1990 to the present day. From a personal point of view I was disappointed to find no mention here, or elsewhere, that I
completely rejected the functionalist model I proposed in the late 1970s during this third period of history. It seems that one is allowed to propose but not subsequently reject ideas; typologies of archaeologists are held to be immutable, in spite of evidence to the contrary! There is a more nuanced history of Argaric research to be written here, especially in relation to the last five decades. The chapter on Argaric landscapes introduces the reader to ‘urban’ settlements without any discussion of how the term is defined and used here and in comparative studies. In the same chapter it would also have been worth noting that the use of carbon stable isotope analyses of cereals from archaeological contexts for the reconstruction of water availability in the past has some limitations that need to be built into our interpretations (see Flohr et al. 2011; Wallace et al. 2013). A surprising omission from the discussion of the evidence for, and nature of, warfare or ‘interpersonal violence’, in the last chapter, is the stunning excavation of the fortifications at La Bastida de Totana and their implications for the practice of siege warfare – surely this evidence and its interpretation cannot be reduced to what the authors call the ‘values and beliefs…rooted in the current hegemonic masculinity model’ (p. 169)?

These are the kinds of specific points that are usually raised in a book review, and the rest of this review could focus on more examples of such points. Instead I would like to concentrate on more general issues. The authors make very clear from the introduction their (and our) need ‘to understand the values and interests guiding the evolution of Argaric narratives’ (p. xxi), and they stress the contrast between these ‘narratives’ that are ‘inspired by a certain approach to history that leans towards grand narratives and abstract social categories’ and ‘the domain of everyday life’ focused on ‘more specific practices and experiences’ (p. xxii) that are neglected by the ‘dominant’ narratives. For this focus the authors allude to the stimulus of gender studies and postcolonial theory. Chapter by chapter they present the ‘dominant narratives’ of Argaric studies with succinct suggestions of how they might change these studies from focus on the ‘top down’ (eg, social and political structures, hierarchies, agricultural production) to the ‘bottom up’ (eg, daily lives of women and children, social identities). The excessive repetition of ‘dominant’ or ‘traditional’ narratives becomes tedious, while the authors’ alternatives are given little space: only the last twenty-five pages of the book are devoted to ‘new narratives’ (gender studies, childhood, social identity, commensality rituals, warfare) and these are summaries of articles they have individually and collectively published elsewhere.

The consequence is that the authors do not develop their ‘new narratives’ in a theoretically coherent and contextually sound manner. How they get from gender studies and postcolonial theory to their specific case studies is not really explained in detail, nor is how their approach is similar or different to those adopted in both Spanish and international contexts. There have been nearly four decades of theoretical presentation and debate in Iberian prehistoric studies, the highlights of which have been the development of materialist theories and dialectical methodologies, the detail, independence and subtlety of which cannot simply be dismissed with an intellectual wave of the hand as ‘traditional’. Within these approaches are work on social practices and maintenance activities (eg, Castro et al. 1996; Sanahuja 2002, neither mentioned by the authors), kinship and funerary practices, and the relations between production and social life. The English speaking reader is introduced to the sites, materials and interpretations of the Argaric, but will not be able to understand these interpretations within the context of archaeological theory and practice in Spain. An alternative structure to the book could, with profit, have placed this contextual discussion, along with the authors’ critique and detailed, alternative proposals, immediately after the introduction to the history of Argaric research. Here would also be a good place to confront in more detail the challenges of deconstructing the categories with which we think and work in practicing archaeology (as they advocate in their introduction), given that the authors themselves use phrases like ‘symbols of power, wealth and prestige’ (eg, when referring to the use of large animals in feasting) as if these symbols represented universal characteristics of human nature.
What I find rather disappointing in this text is the lack of a sense of real excitement about the achievements of the archaeological research on the Argaric that has been undertaken since the 1970s, beginning with small-scale, stratigraphic excavations in Granada and expanding into large-scale, interdisciplinary and international projects at such sites as Fuente Alamo, Gatas, Peñalosa and La Bastida de Totana. These projects have produced a fantastic amount of new data on all of the themes discussed in this book, as well as being committed to outreach to the general public (eg, Argaric exhibitions in museums in Almería and Barcelona, visitor centres at Castellon Alto and La Bastida). This data is still being produced and digested. The stimulus of Vicente Lull’s 1983 book *La cultura de El Argar* cannot be underestimated, given the generation of students for whom it was a starting point in Argaric studies. It was also a major stimulus to me and an important reason why I accepted his invitation to collaborate on the Gatas project and other archaeoecological surveys. This collaboration was based on Spanish and foreign resources and specialists and developed novel lines of research on the Argaric: these included (for the first time in Spain) lead isotope analyses and a systematic programme of AMS C14 dating at Oxford University on human bone from burials in a variety of early and modern excavations (this was not a Barcelona project, as the authors state on p. 32, a surprising claim as one of the authors worked on the Gatas project). This was exciting at the time, and Argaric studies have remained exciting and important, not only within a Spanish context, but also for their contribution to research on the European Bronze Age. Our knowledge and understanding of the Argaric is also situated within, and enhanced by, a wider context of research (sadly absent here) on the Bronze Age ‘cultures’ in neighbouring areas of southern Iberia. The historical context of the Argaric in southeast Spain is another omission, focusing as it does on evidence for cultural continuity and discontinuity from the local Chalcolithic. Both the inter-regional and local historical contexts are essential to our understanding of the Argaric and have been exciting developments of recent research.

My overall impression is that the authors’ alternative approach to the Argaric raises more questions than it answers. They could have done themselves more justice by adopting a more nuanced presentation of Argaric research and by situating their theoretical and methodological approach in the more detailed and analytical context of existing approaches in Spain and beyond, rather than retreating to the well-worn dichotomy between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘new’. They deserve congratulations for trying to give the English-speaking reader an introduction to all facets of Argaric studies, but I think that it could have been so much better.

**References**


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