



## Book Reviews

### **THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE IBERIAN PENINSULA – FROM THE PALEOLITHIC TO THE BRONZE AGE BY KATINA LILLIOS**

*Cambridge University Press. 2020. 387pp, 112 B&W figs, 8 colour plates, hb, ISBN 978-1-107-11334-3, £75.00*

One million years in 300 pages with a 74-page blockbuster bibliography! Or to put it another way, from the first human occupation to the end of the Early Bronze Age in Iberia. This is a major work of synthesis (let alone a staggering amount of reading) with the full Cambridge University Press presentational treatment. It is the first book in English on its topic since Hubert Savory's *Spain and Portugal. The Prehistory of the Iberian Peninsula* published in 1968 by Thames and Hudson in their Ancient Peoples and Places series (often called 'Ancient Peepholes' by the series editor Glyn Daniel). As Katina Lillios points out, the compartmentalisation of archaeological research, organization and practice in and on the Iberian Peninsula has shaped the synthetic treatment of its prehistory: there are books in Spanish and Portuguese on the prehistories of the individual countries, there is coverage of 'early' (ie, Palaeolithic) as opposed to 'later' (ie, from the Early Neolithic to the Iron Age) prehistory and 'protohistory', detailed and exhaustive presentations of particular periods and materials, comparative regional treatments, and more thematic debates on 'big issues' (eg, the nature of social, political and economic organisation and institutions in the third and early second millennia BC). Although English-speaking archaeologists have participated in archaeological research in Iberia, Lillios is the first to grasp the nettle (given the scale of the challenge, this risks getting stung a lot!) and present what we now know about the peninsula's prehistory.

The world of archaeology, let alone Iberian prehistory, has changed beyond recognition in the five decades since the publication of Savory's book. The discipline has gained access to a variety of new resources and techniques, providing us with masses of new data that are often a challenge to digest, given the sources (the physical, biological and environmental sciences) in which we, as archaeologists, are not universally well-trained. In 1968 we were in the beginnings of an inter-generational debate on the need for theory in archaeology, whereas now such debates have long since moved on to the needs and advantages of competing theories. Archaeologists are more reflexive, scrutinising the importance of their subject and how it is not just, as Kent Flannery once put it, 'the greatest fun you can have with your pants on', but (whether we agree or not) important in the pursuit of different cultural and political agendas. In Spain and Portugal the agenda of

nationalism has been prominent, while the adoption of theories has not blindly followed the latest fads from the Anglo-American world. As Lillios (p.27) puts it 'a highly heterogenous landscape of archaeological practices and theoretical approaches characterizes Iberian archaeology in the twenty-first century'.

Lillios (p.293) has designed her approach around what she calls 'three kinds of stories about the Iberian past', basically 'the work of archaeologists', 'the material traces of ancient Iberian peoples and our current understanding of their lives and practices', and 'the relationship between the Iberian archaeological past and Spanish and Portuguese societies'. This is seen in the book's structure, both between and within chapters. After an introduction to the geography and history of archaeology in Spain and Portugal, the body of the book is mainly divided into five chapters: 'The First Iberians and Last Neanderthals' (that is Lower and Middle Palaeolithic), 'The First Modern Humans in Iberia' (Late Pleistocene/Upper Palaeolithic), 'The Creation of New Worlds' (Mesolithic through Middle Neolithic), 'The Expansion of Interregional Contacts' (Late Neolithic and Early Copper Age) and 'The Emergence of Ranked Societies' (Late Copper Age to Early Bronze Age). In each case the current state of archaeological knowledge is set within the context of the history of archaeological research, presenting key sites, types of site and materials, and their interpretation(s) while trying to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of all these kinds of data.

Taken overall there are some really big changes in our knowledge. The earliest human occupation of the peninsula goes back to c.1.4–1m years ago, Neanderthal populations lasted some 6000 years longer than the earliest modern humans anywhere in Northern Spain and the rest of Europe, and the Coa valley has one of the largest collections of Palaeolithic rock art in the world. Our knowledge of the distribution and types of early agricultural sites and collective burials, especially in the interior regions of the peninsula, has been revolutionised by surface survey, excavations of stratified sites have anchored Neolithic sequences, and in the case of La Draga (south of Barcelona) given us a first glimpse of the perishable material culture of everyday life from the sixth millennium BC. The enclosed settlements of the late fourth and third millennia BC are no longer restricted to southeast Spain and central Portugal as they were in 1968, but extend from the south-east round through southern and western Iberia (including the central plateau) as far north as Galicia. The major difference is in the method of enclosure (ditched rather than walled) and the scale of the largest sites: the 'mega-site' of Valencina de la Concepción near Seville covers an area of c. 450 ha and one of the collective monumental tombs within this area at Montelirio (along with a neighbouring structure of the same date) has produced a fantastic array of grave goods made of both local and exotic materials. For the Early Bronze Age the Argaric 'culture' has been one of the most intensively studied in Europe since the 1980s, with site

sequences and regional economic and political structures that challenge our understanding of Bronze Age Europe outside of its southeast and central 'core'.

Three observations strike me. I started my research on Iberian prehistory with the zeal of youth and a close, critical reading of Savory's 1968 book. In the spirit of the times I followed Colin Renfrew's lead and argued (against Savory) for Iberian cultural and social development independent of contacts with the east Mediterranean. Population movements or rather vague 'influences' were out, and independent development was in. This undoubtedly provided a stimulus for research, but in the longer term (as Lillios observes) we now have the technical tools to put alongside studies of rock art and material culture styles in a more nuanced interpretation of scales of population movement and human interaction. There are increasing numbers of illuminating isotopic, aDNA and other bioarchaeological studies showing degrees of population movement, including suggestions of interaction and movement across the Straits of Gibraltar from the Early Neolithic and later Copper Age sites such as Valencina de la Concepción. Ivory was taken to, or obtained from, both North Africa and the Middle East to southern Iberia, where it was worked into objects. Secondly the large, ditched enclosures of the late fourth and third millennia BC need understanding in different ways than as 'settlements'. Lillios (p.187) uses the phrase 'a space of aggregation, and not a place of habitation' and this is as good a starting point as any. Thirdly there is a strong sense in which Iberia, for all periods of its prehistory, has changed from a European backwater to an important cultural centre in its own right. Again, look at the Early Bronze Age Argaric – the economic, political and social structures now being proposed, as well as the discoveries of what would be called 'palaces' in the east Mediterranean, transform our knowledge of the kind of society that lived in south-east Spain.

Lillios ends the book by getting out her crystal ball and making suggestions for critical areas of future research on Iberian prehistory. These include mobility, taking a closer look at the interaction of structure and agency, looking at cultural studies of landscape, focusing on violence, and giving more attention to the relationship between gender, age and power. She also focuses attention on the potential of museum-based studies of archaeological collections, the creation of digital repositories, and the development of regional studies that are not constrained by modern national and local administrative boundaries. Food for thought for the next five decades?

Overall this book is a clear, up to date and detailed introduction to the prehistory of the Iberian peninsula and Lillios deserves great credit for taking on the task and steering clear of the nettles. There is much here for both specialist readers (whichever periods and regions are of interest to them) and for those who want to know why and how Spanish and Portuguese archaeology has increased in its importance in recent decades. There are also excellent and stimulating examples

of practical and theoretical research by Spanish and Portuguese archaeologists from which we could all learn.

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