Book Reviews

THE NEOLITHIC OF EUROPE: PAPERS IN HONOUR OF ALASDAIR WHITTLE EDITED BY PENNY BCIKLE, VICKI CUMMINGS, DANIELA HOFMANN AND JOSHUA POLLARD


As the editors explain in their Introduction, putting together a festschrift for someone like Professor Alasdair Whittle was never going to be an easy task as his colleagues, friends and former students are numerous and widespread. A most hefty and esoteric volume (or series of volumes) would most likely have been the result of a conventional call for papers so instead, would-be contributors were asked to collaborate and the result is a volume of 19 papers by some 51 authors. Whilst there are still some individually penned articles, this collaborative approach arguably produces some more rounded discussions and minimises the risks of repetition and even contradiction. It is an approach that generally works well though there are some odd comparisons such as the LBK houses of the Paris Basin with settlement patterns in Northern Greece, and the ‘Neolithisation’ of Britain and Ireland with South East Europe (though most of the Balkan countries are missing from the latter geographical unit). I am not convinced that this ‘bookending of Europe’ works given the spatial and chronological differences. There are also wanderings into the Iron Age in papers on North Aegean tells and stag symbolism – both good papers but not sitting particularly comfortably given the title of the book. There are also a few annoying errors that have escaped the proof reader(s). Thus, in the tabula gratulatoria Umberto Albarella and Leendert Louwe Kooijmans both get modified names and Charles Tilly becomes Tilley (p.99), perhaps a confusion of Tillies.

Each of the papers reflect Alasdair’s areas of research from the North Aegean via central Europe to aspects of the British and Irish Neolithic. Radiocarbon dating and scientific approaches to population studies also feature. Burials and settlements, monuments and feasting, hoarding, geoarchaeology and art and artefacts all have a presence in the book and so it appears to be all encompassing in its coverage of Neolithic studies. It is also a good mix of theoretical and empirical archaeological approaches: a slave to neither and comparatively jargon-free. Less well covered is the ‘Europe’ part of the title. There is weighting towards Britain and Ireland and to central Europe and the Danube valley (particularly Hungary). Italy does not feature, neither, really, do the Low Countries, the Baltic or Scandinavian countries. European Russia is absent and there is scant mention of the Iberian peninsula: given the remarkable Neolithic enclosures that are being extensively studied in Spain and Portugal, this absence is all the more disappointing.

It is not my intention to review individual papers. Readers will have their own opinions depending on their individual regional and academic specialisms but given Alasdair’s justified reputation for synthesising, there are few broad-brush synthetic papers (Bradley & Sanjuan, Bartosiewicz et al.). This has been attempted in some of the ‘bookending’ studies mentioned above but in my opinion, this does not really work very well and is akin to a sandwich without any filling. Instead, the book has a rather disjointed feel being a series of small windows rather than a panoramic vista.

One thing that does impart a unity to the volume however is the affection with which the individual offerings are presented. Each is a testimony to Alasdair’s standing amongst the European archaeological community. During his distinguished career he has influenced and befriended many scholars from Europe and beyond and the introduction and introductory paragraphs of each of the papers clearly demonstrate warmth, gratitude and respect. Despite my
misgivings, I am sure that Alasdair will share none of them. I am also sure that he will (rightly) be delighted with this festschrift and he should be proud of the influence he has had on studies into the European Neolithic.

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