Archaeology has changed in many different ways during the last five decades, but the concern with big issues of the human past (e.g. human origins, the adoption of agriculture, and the development of different forms of inequality) remains central to what a significant number of archaeologists do. The social, political and economic inequalities that are so pronounced and unjust in our contemporary world are not part of some grand design, or hardwired into human beings, but the outcomes of histories and processes of change. The study of the past gives us opportunities to analyse these histories and processes, and to see other ways of being, rather than a fixed human condition. These are reasons (although not necessarily the only ones) why Archaeology is an important subject that merits public support and wide dissemination, rather than being the often-stressed record of ‘human achievement’.

The Prehistory of Iberia is a contribution to the study of the development of social stratification and state societies during the later prehistory of Western and Mediterranean Europe. It originated in papers given in a symposium for the 2008 meetings of the Society for American Archaeology and has been enlarged for publication. The contributing authors (overwhelmingly Spanish) present regional case studies from the Iberian peninsula that together cover the periods from the adoption of agriculture through to urban societies tied into trans-Mediterranean trade networks at the end of the first millennium BC. An emphasis is placed on the comparison of regional sequences of later prehistoric societies, the nature of these societies and how they changed through time. The book’s sub-title foregrounds the word ‘debating’ in relation to arguments proposed for the emergence of state or state-like societies in the third and second millennia BC in southern Spain. The editors stress the central influence of historical materialism on these arguments, as well as the importance of historical contingency in opposition to simple evolutionary models of social, political and economic change. Lastly there is an emphasis, which comes through in several chapters, on the active resistance of structures of domination by people and communities at the bottom of social systems.

The book is divided into three parts, the first focusing on social stratification and the state in Iberian prehistory (three chapters by the editors), the second on regional case studies, and the third a commentary by Chris Scarre on the wider context of social structure and change in later prehistoric Europe. The case for the emergence of state/state-like societies in south-eastern Spain has been made by Fernando Molina and Juan Antonio Cámar for the third millennium Millaran group, and by Vicente Lull, Rafa Micó, Cristina Rihuete and Roberto Risch for the Argaric group of the Early Bronze Age. For the Guadalquivir valley of central-southern and south-western Spain, Francisco Nocete has argued for the existence of an early state society in the third millennium BC as part of a regional core-periphery system. I have also to declare an interest, in that I have supported the proposal of a state-like society for the Argaric group, and have a long history of collaboration with Lull and his colleagues. In this book Gilman reaffirms his strong
doubts as to the existence of state institutions in the Argaric, while García Sanjúan and Murillo-Baroso present a clearly structured case against the existence of an early state in south-western Spain during the third millennium BC. The absence of contributions to this volume by the main protagonists of early states in southern Spain means that we read critiques, but not the debates promised in the book’s sub-title. More discussion of the theoretical bases of their arguments would be helpful, alongside the empirical critiques presented in this book. It is particularly important to understand how the Marxist theorization of the state differs from that which has been popular in the Anglo-American world since the 1970s.

The paper by Antonio Ramos presents a chiefdom model for the third millennium Millaran group, with a radically different and idiosyncratic interpretation of its settlement evolution to ‘urbanism’. The paper is, I think, a little difficult for the non-specialist reader to follow, both in terms of the detail and location of sites (e.g. between what might be called the core and periphery of the Argaric region), and their interpretation. It does not help detailed discussion that some key publications (e.g. by Lull and his colleagues, and by Risch) are not cited. His assertion (p. 87) that lowland (as opposed to hilltop) Argaric settlements have been confused with ‘Copper Age archaeological features’ is odd, given the well-known and dated excavations of such sites as Los Cipreses and Rincón de Almendricos in Murcia and now Cerro de San Cristobal in Granada.

Gonzalo Aranda examines the early second millennium BC from a different perspective, criticising the notion of the ‘supposed cultural uniformity of Argaric societies’, especially the practice of intramural burial. He usefully brings together the evidence for the re-use of megalithic tombs and natural and artificial caves for Argaric interments, including previously unpublished radiocarbon dates on skeletal samples from three sites. Aranda proposes the widespread ‘cultural and ideological resistance’ against Argaric social stratification by local populations maintaining collective mortuary rituals. One may, of course, turn the argument around and propose that the use of these extramural tombs marked the efforts by the Argaric group to overcome such resistance by placing their burial ‘norm’ within the context of the pre-Argaric funerary practices. It is also worth remembering that the projected totals for intramural burial in Argaric settlements are well short of those inferred by the settlements’ size and longevity: in the core area, it is a hypothesis worthy of consideration that at least some of these might have been placed in megalithic tombs or caves without artefactual markers.

Outside of south-eastern Spain, and beyond debates over the existence of state/state-like societies in the third and early second millennia BC, the contributing authors present a variety of regional sequences of social, political and economic change. The theoretical approaches and concepts structuring archaeological research include historical materialism (far from a unified body of thought and practice, and worth a careful exposition of its impact on, and use by, Spanish and Portuguese archaeologists) through complex systems, post-colonial theory, personhood, hybridity, divided and undivided societies (drawing on the work of Clastres), non-linear social change, feasting rituals, and object biographies. The regions covered are understandably selective (e.g. nothing on southern Portugal in the third to early second millennia BC, or areas of the central plateau outside of La Mancha for the same periods of time, or north-eastern Spain for any period), but many of these case studies serve as highly readable and informative presentations of current knowledge and thought. There are a lot of new data that will be unfamiliar to the non-Iberian specialist (e.g. the excavation and radiocarbon dating of Late Bronze Age settlements in Atlantic Iberia, the palaeoenvironmental evidence for a spike in metallurgical activity in north-western Spain c. 1000 BC). The best chapters also make clear some of the problems with the available data (e.g. the difficulties posed by the publication record for the Early Bronze Age settlements of La Mancha).
Overall this is a bold and enterprising book that raises important issues, both for Iberia and for other regions of later prehistoric Europe. The authors seem committed to non-linear interpretations of social, political and economic structures and wish to distance themselves from typological and evolutionary accounts of social change. The presentation is generally good, but (with the non-specialist reader in mind) some authors could have given greater thought to the quantity of their illustrations. Many regions of the Iberian peninsula now have a denser, and more calibrated record of later prehistoric societies than four decades ago when I was starting my archaeological career. That record is still uneven in quality, and spatial and temporal distribution, and has to be understood in the contexts of its publication and the infrastructure of local archaeological practice. A social archaeology is more the norm than the exception it was in the 1970s. A variety of interpretive models are being devoured from often Anglo-American theoretical literature and applied to Iberian regional data for different periods. This book draws attention to these changes, and presents critiques of models of state/state-like societies in the third and second millennia BC. The absence of the protagonists of these models impedes a true debate, but interested readers should be able to follow up key sources and clarify their understanding of the issues at stake.

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