



Book Reviews

BRONZE AGE SETTLEMENT AND LAND-USE IN THY, NORTHWEST DENMARK BY JENS-HENRIK BECH, BERIT VALENTIN ERIKSEN & KRISTIAN KRISTIANSEN (EDITORS)

Museum Thy / Jutland Archaeological Society, 2018, 2 volumes (285 +578pp), extensively illus in B&W and col figs, hb, ISBN 978-87-93423-22-0, £50.00

Such is the serendipitous beauty of archaeology that Thy, a small region of Northwest Denmark, has featured prominently in several key theoretical debates of the discipline over the past twenty years. Obviously, this apparent oddity results from the long-term collaboration of two heavy-weights of the discipline, Kristian Kristiansen and Timothy Earle, whose contributions feature in contrasted ways in these two imposing volumes. Weighing together almost 900 pages, these volumes offer an impressive collection of papers focusing on changes in architecture, settlement pattern – the land use component referred to in the title – and parallel transformations in the vegetation cover as inferred through extensive palynological sampling.

In a perhaps unexpected and/or unconventional way, the first volume encompasses the more synthetic chapters, while the second volume includes more classical field and specialist reports, including contributions spanning the entire range of material culture, including pottery, lithics, amber, zooarchaeological and archaeobotanical remains. Obviously, up to any reader to find their way through this extensive collection, but, as a traditionalist who likes to read from the first to the last page (and does make my own mind along the way rather than following someone's lead), I found this setup slightly off-putting. This being said, the integration and organisation of all chapters across both volumes is exceptional and renders the overall output a most enlightening, if dense, reading.

It is impossible in the limited space of the present review to discuss diligently every individual contribution and the focus will therefore here be upon the more synthetic chapters found in the opening volume. But, before doing so, a few words are needed on the second volume, which presents individual sites (and – incidentally – includes Timothy Earle's limited contribution). Suffice to say that all chapters are of the highest standards, and clearly demonstrate the changing nature of the evidence across this area. As previously said, the finds reports cover a wide range of archaeological data, and will be of direct interest to the corresponding specialists.

But back to the first volume and its more synthetic discussions. The long-term sequence presented here is clear and compelling, with an ever-increasing human land use at the expense of the forest cover, up to point where the landscape is basically devoid of any sizeable forest. This reconstruction is based upon robust palynological sequences described in Chapters 8 and 9, whilst Chapters 4 to 7 explore its implications in terms of architecture (houses, farmsteads and animal pens) and overall settlement pattern. The wider dimensions of this sequence are explored more at length in both Chapters 2 and 3, respectively written by Jans-Henrik Bech and Marianne Rasmussen, and Kristian Kristiansen. Chapter 2 provides a very dense, if sometimes a bit opaque, interpretation of the local sequence, as well as an attempt at inserting it within a wider North-Western European picture. Whilst the former section is compelling, the same does not apply to the latter, largely as the authors include an ever growing range of data, and thus have to skim over the regional idiosyncrasies of the archaeological record. Kristiansen's argument is more theoretical and aims at integrating, not always successfully one must say, the archaeological sequence with his own pre-existing models and conceptions of Bronze Age societies. The volume concludes with Claus Malmros' thorough exploration of day-to-day implications for these Bronze Age communities of living in such a practically treeless landscape, which extensively resorts to both pollen and charcoal data. The result is a fascinating account of the long-term interplay of architectural and wood-procurement techniques (e.g. coping with the lack of quality timber through fossil and drift wood).

It is noteworthy that the fieldwork reported in these volumes dates back to the 1990s. Given the long time required to process such large-scale datasets and the usual editorial delays (on page 41, the authors mention a present date of February 2013, whilst Kristiansen only refers to aDNA work published until 2015), it is perhaps not unsurprising, if still unfortunate, that several chapters somehow feel a bit outdated. This is especially true for the sections on the use of cumulative ^{14}C probability distributions, though admittedly this field has experienced a fast-paced development over the past few years. Likewise, palynological analysis, as a privileged marker of anthropic impact upon vegetation cover and the landscape, represents a key part of the volume and, if excellent, remains relatively classical in design and would have benefited of some recent methodological developments and associated synthetic studies.

From an editorial point of view, the quality of the printing, text and illustrations must be acknowledged. On a more negative note, one could have wished for the map legends and symbology to be more systematic, as one gets easily lost without prior knowledge of the local geography, and for the LiDAR maps to be provided with a colour ramp. As such, it is indeed difficult to identify what the contrasts shown on the figures actually correspond to in the landscape. Lastly, one of the greatest strengths of this project and of these volumes lies in the amount and quality of data produced, some of which are reported in extensive appendices. This

being said, the latter unfortunately do not seem to be accompanied by any form of digital archives, or at least anything that the present reviewer could easily identify. Although the addition of a physical support such as a DVD is arguably not a valid nor viable editorial alternative, the use of an online repository (or direct referencing to any official online archives) would have been more than welcome. A bit of a missed opportunity here.

Overall, the legacy of the Thy region in the pantheon of key archaeological landscapes is already well-established, and this publication will not change much to this respected status. These two rather traditional volumes in design offer high-quality archaeology, both in terms of fieldwork and laboratory analysis/interpretation. These in turn highlight, if needed to be, the importance of long-term regional field projects with clear focus, multidisciplinary breadth and necessary resources. A must-have for anyone involved in the Bronze Age of Northwest Europe and, to some extent, historical ecology.

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