

ELIZABETH C. BANKS. *Lerna VII: the Neolithic settlement*. 2016. xxi+579 pages, numerous colour and b&w illustrations, 13 tables. Oxford & Havertown (PA): American School of Classical Studies at Athens; 978-0-87661307-8 hardback £89.



The site of Lerna on the eastern shore of the Peloponnese was excavated during the 1950s by the American School of Classical Studies under the direction of John L. Caskey. The latest volume in the series dedicated to the results of that work has much to contribute to our understanding of the Neolithic

period of southern Greece. Six previous publications (Lerna volumes I–VI) have detailed the archaeology of this remarkable settlement, occupied for over 5000 years, from the Neolithic through to the Middle Bronze Age, even though the emblematic Early Helladic ‘House of the Tiles’ has monopolised much of the attention. As was the case with many archaeologists of his generation, Caskey realised the importance of the early prehistory of the site and devoted much effort to investigating aspects of the pre-Helladic material revealed during his excavations (1952–1958).

Many well-known prehistoric sites in Greece are, unfortunately, dominated by their acclaimed Bronze Age ruins (most obviously, Knossos in Crete); consequently, humble Neolithic farmers and their material remains have found it difficult to attain the place they deserve in the study of Greece’s prehistory. Caskey’s deep conviction, however, of the importance of the Neolithic material he encountered scattered in the south-western section of the mound of Lerna is evident in his excavation strategy; his results are to be admired. Reaching, in some areas, the bottom of the 4m-deep archaeological deposits provided Caskey with the opportunity to address *ad hoc* the archaeological sequence of the late Early to Middle Neolithic farming village beneath the Early Helladic remains. Having said that, the story of the excavation of Neolithic Lerna and of the subsequent study of its material, described honestly in the Preface and Acknowledgements (Chapter 1), vividly reveals the

difficulties that characterise the fate of the finds from some of the most celebrated multi-period prehistoric mounds in Greece.

It is much to her credit that Elizabeth C. Banks, herself involved for decades in the study of the material from Lerna, has undertaken the laborious task of unravelling the history of the research of the Neolithic levels of the site, including the different recording systems employed over the years, the often diverse interpretations of the stratigraphy and the difficulties involved in presenting a comprehensive synthesis of the data. Most notable, for instance, is the author’s suggestion—in agreement with Vitelli’s (2007) analysis of the ceramic finds from the site—that Caskey’s well-known designations (Lerna I and Lerna II) should be abandoned in favour of a regional and supposedly more credible chronological scheme based on the sequence at the nearby Franchthi Cave; this is followed by the remark that even this scheme should remain open for future revision once more field research is carried out at the site and the Neolithic of southern Greece becomes better known. This well-written book comprises eight chapters of uneven length. Chapters 2 and 3 describe in minute detail the relentless efforts by Caskey in the 1950s to locate and excavate the undisturbed layers of the Neolithic settlement buried under the Bronze Age deposits (areas JA and JB, trench AP), while Chapters 4 and 5 deal adequately with the pottery lots and other categories of material remains (lithics, bones and shells) derived from excavated areas with mixed Neolithic contexts (i.e. the so-called ‘Unphased Neolithic’). The short discussion of Middle and Final Neolithic burial practices at Lerna (Chapter 6), although based on limited data—11 inhumations from pits outside the houses, presented in detail elsewhere by Angel (1971)—is invaluable considering the overall dearth of mortuary evidence from southern Greece for the period. A long and detailed list of minor objects in other materials (e.g. stone, bone) completes the presentation of the finds from Neolithic Lerna, including a discussion of the figurine assemblage and a short reference to the well-known ‘Venus of Myloi’ figurine already published (Chapter 7).

Three short but informative appendices at the end of the volume provide a useful list of stratigraphic references for the architectural remains of Lerna; a necessary correlation of the ceramics with the rather confusing phasing of the site suggested over the years by Caskey and Vitelli; and lastly, the comprehensive study of the Neolithic fauna by D.S. Reese. The study

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concludes (Chapter 8) with a modest discussion—a kind of synthesis—of the settlement of Neolithic Lerna, rightly emphasising the limited area of the site exposed to date and the desperate shortage of data from this period in the Peloponnese. Yet, the author's decision to look for comparable material solely within the Neolithic of southern Greece has denied her the opportunities available from the north (Greek Macedonia), where there is a plethora of recent Early Neolithic sites with material remains similar to those of Lerna (e.g. pit-houses, rectilinear structures, ditches) (Karamitrou-Mentessidi *et al.* 2015). Moreover, Banks resorts repeatedly, for relative chronological and stratigraphic purposes (and then based only on pottery characteristics), to just a single site—the Franchthi Cave. However understandable this is, given that site's proximity to Lerna, this decision does not compensate for the complete lack of radiocarbon dates (or efforts to obtain them), or for the weakly supported references to the evolution of habitation choices over the long Neolithic period.

Elizabeth C. Banks, having taken on the burdensome task of organising and publishing material from an old but emblematic excavation, has done so with competence and a welcome directness. This handsomely produced book is an invaluable contribution to the history of the poorly known Neolithic of southern Greece.

## References

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NIKOS EFSTRATIOU

Department of Archaeology, Aristotle University of  
Thessaloniki, Greece  
(Email: [efstrati@hist.auth.gr](mailto:efstrati@hist.auth.gr))

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JOHANNES MÜLLER, KNUT RASSMANN & MYKHAILO VIDEIKO (ed.). *Trypillia mega-sites and European pre-history 4100–3400 BCE* (Themes in Contemporary Archaeology 2). 2016. xviii+311 pages, numerous

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The Trypillia mega-sites have fascinated generations of scholars since their discovery more than half a century ago. This remarkable phenomenon con-

tributed to the development of prehistoric Europe, and laid the foundations of present-day European societies. Despite the number of excavations, projects and publications, the full archaeological potential of these sites has not yet been realised. Some scholars blame the recent political climate or a lack of dialogue between East and West; others point to more technical reasons, such as taphonomic processes of site formation, the lack of systematic research, the unavailability of data or even a lack of funding. While some or all of the above might be correct, the main issue is, in my opinion, the absence of a systematic contextualisation of data within specific diachronic timeframes—in other words, we lack a dynamic assessment of the available data within suitable chronological frameworks. This edited volume has, to a certain extent, been able to provide this missing context. The varied results, from projects old and new, have been assessed and ordered within appropriate chronologies so as to maximise the value of the available data. This spatial and temporal contextualisation of the archaeological and environmental evidence helps to formulate a plausible narrative, while also highlighting what is missing, why, and how specific lacunae might eventually be filled.

The book begins with a general introduction by two of the editors (Müller and Rassmann). The 18 chapters that follow are grouped into five sections. Section 1 comprises two chapters; the first sets the Trypillia mega-sites in the context of the demography and social processes in Europe, c. 4100–3500 BC. Chapter 2 summarises the history of Trypillia studies from the nineteenth century to the present.

Section 2 focuses on the various mega-sites, with a special emphasis on those excavated during the collaborative German-Ukrainian and British-Ukrainian projects carried out over the past five years (e.g. Maidanetske and Nebelivka). Other relevant mega-sites such as Taljanky, Dobrovody,