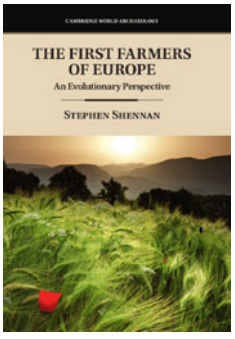
# Book reviews

Stephen Shennan. 2018. *The first farmers of Europe: an evolutionary perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-108-43521-5 £24.99.




It is hard to sum up the number of monographs, series and conference proceedings written on the process of Neolithisation in Europe, the first farmers of Europe and the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition. It would be even more difficult to place Stephen Shennan's new book comparatively in this long list, and there are good reasons for not doing so.

The first is that precisely because so much has been written about the Neolithic in Europe and will no doubt continue to be published—including contributions from neighbouring disciplines—every now and then a thorough synthesis of what has been achieved is needed. Shennan's new book delivers this. Furthermore, as the subtitle 'an evolutionary perspective' suggests, the author is summarising and integrating results from a large body of work that has emerged from a series of his own large-scale, funded projects on this topic. If this book had emerged as a synthesis of these efforts alone it would have been justified, its additional scope vindicates it still further.

Chapter 1 begins with an introduction to the implications that the origin and spread of farming had for human history. The main aim of this chapter, as stated, is "understanding the interactions between populations, subsistence and socio-cultural traditions that resulted in the origin of cereal agriculture in Southwest Asia and its subsequent spread westward into Europe" (p. 1). The evolutionary perspective becomes apparent as Shennan elaborates on the principles of evolutionary demography, human behavioural ecology and cultural evolution, introducing concepts by Thomas Robert Malthus and Ester Boserup and the framework of life-history theory. This defines what constitutes 'becoming a farmer'. He concludes this first chapter by outlining the structure of the book, which essentially builds a chrono-geographic account of the process of Neolithisation. Beginning with its humble and long drawn out origin in the so-called Fertile Crescent of post-Ice Age to Early Holocene South-west Asia (Chapter 2), Neolithisation is traced through to Britain and Ireland in North-western Europe around 5000 years later (Chapter 8), before the summary and conclusions in Chapter 9. The chapters in between deal with: the initial expansion of farming from its local origins (Chapter 3); the two main streams of expansion westwards through Central Europe and the Mediterranean (Chapters 4–5); the centuries following this rapid spread in the seventh millennium BC and its consequences (Chapter 6), and the expansion farther north and west to Scandinavia (Chapter 7), Britain and Ireland.

What could have been a dry, temporal, account of prehistory is in fact precisely the opposite. Shennan applies a common formula to all chapters, which weaves a unifying thread through the book and connects the chapters. In doing so, he creates a very valuable review of the many lines of evidence that contribute to the broader narrative of the process of Neolithisation.

In every chapter, the broad characteristics of the archaeological record are summarised, including the architecture of dwellings and settlements, houses, burials, and the forms of material culture such as pottery, tools and artefacts. For each region, Shennan characterises the breadth of diet, intensity, complexity and diversity of domesticated animals and plants compared to other natural resources. He addresses changes in climate patterns, subsistence strategies and social contexts in association with population-density estimates from either radiocarbon population proxies (based on the research of his collaborators and other scholars), and integrates the latest results from isotopic and archaeogenetic research. The volume is refreshing in that it is never dogmatic or deterministic—the author is candid about the inconsistencies between findings, and highlights the gaps in our knowledge that remain despite decades of effort; these suggest




ANTIQUITY 93 372 (2019): 1683–1695 https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.189

themselves as future avenues of research. Amidst the concise yet meticulous accounts and syntheses of various types of evidence for each region, Shennan also manages to revisit the dominant theoretical frameworks in the field of Neolithic archaeology—examples include 'ideal despotic distribution' and the 'wave-of-advance model'—reflect on the changing trends in academic thinking he has encountered in his career and critically assess their lasting (or not) validity in the light of the growing body of data. It is this balanced combination of theoretical background, critical evaluation of points of consensus in the field and integration of new bioarchaeological and quantitative data, woven into a compelling narrative of trials and tribulations, that makes this book a valuable contribution to scholarship.

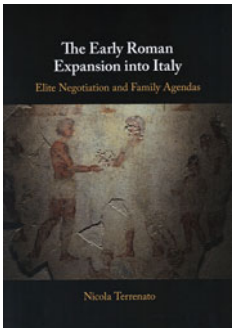
I have few criticisms, but one is that the book does rely heavily on Anglophone sources, while those from Eastern Europe—if we apply a geographic definition—appear underrepresented, as does the geographic region. This could be explained by the fact that Neolithisation took a different trajectory there, which is reasonable, but the question of why this might have been the case is no less interesting and was not addressed satisfactorily.

In the same vein, while not central to the main rationale of the book, a critical review of the archaeological terminology of the 'Neolithic', particularly in regions where the model of the classical 'farming package' is difficult to sustain, would have rounded up the book nicely.

Would I recommend this book to my students? Yes, no doubt. To archaeologists as well? Yes: it presents the most up-to-date, concise summary in a fast-paced field of research.

Wolfgang Haak
Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History, Jena, Germany
(Email: haak@shh.mpg.de)

Nicola Terrenato. 2019. *The early Roman expansion into Italy: elite negotiation and family agendas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-108-42267-3 £75.




Considering its exceptional size, durability and historical legacy, it is unsurprising that few subjects in history speak as strongly to the public imagination—at least in the Western world—as the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. Over the past centuries, it has served as an ideological inspiration for imperialism and, conversely, has been interpreted in light of such imperialist strategies. Yet it also remains one of the most vehemently debated topics: despite centuries of scholarship (not only in the historical disciplines), opinions still differ as to what were the mechanisms behind Roman expansion, the reasons for its enduring success or its ultimate decline.

By deconstructing monocausal explanations grounded in Rome's presumed moral, organisational and military superiority, recent scholarship has seen considerable advances in this debate. On the one hand, science-based methods increasingly contribute to our understanding of Imperial decline; on the other, critical re-readings of ancient written sources and a growing body of archaeological evidence lead to more systemic and dynamic understandings of early Roman expansion.

Nicola Terrenato's *The early Roman expansion into Italy* forms an extremely welcome contribution to the latter line of enquiry. Drawing on ideas the author has developed in previous papers, the ambitious aim of this book is twofold: to present "a combined archaeological and historical synthesis of the Roman expansion in central and southern Italy during the fourth and third centuries BCE", which is "more productively embedded in the general, global archaeological and historical discourse" (p. xiv); and to "change our understanding of the very nature of Roman conquest of central and southern Italy" (p. xv).

Terrenato's approach to the topic can be characterised as systemic and multi-scalar. It sets out with a discussion of the deeper historical (Chapter 2) and broader geographic context (Chapter 3) in which Rome arose. It then proceeds with a closer examination of the process of expansion. This is done first through a discussion of Rome's dealings with a selection of incorporated





https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.189 Published online by Cambridge University Press