

Review

Recent developments in later prehistoric Iberia

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MARÍA CRUZ BERROCAL, LEONARDO GARCÍA SANJUÁN & ANTONIO GILMAN (ed.). *The prehistory of Iberia: debating early social stratification and the state* (Routledge Studies in Archaeology 6). xii+423 pages, 31 b&w illustrations, and 16 tables. 2013. New York & Abingdon: Routledge; 978-0-415-88592-8 hardback £80.

ANTÓNIO CARLOS DE VALERA (ed.). *Recent prehistoric enclosures and funerary practices in Europe* (British Archaeological Reports International series 2676). iii+154 pages, numerous b&w illustrations, and tables. 2014. Oxford: Archaeopress; 978-1-4073-1318-4 paperback £29.

GONZALO ARANDA JIMÉNEZ, SANDRA MONTÓN-SUBÍAS & MARGARITA SÁNCHEZ ROMERO. *The archaeology of Bronze Age Iberia: Argaric societies*. (Routledge Studies in Archaeology 17). xxv+189 pages, numerous b&w illustrations. 2015. New York & Abingdon: Routledge; 978-1-13-882133-0 hardback £85.



In contrast to the well-known Palaeolithic archaeology of Iberia and its contribution to scholarly debates on the

earliest Europeans, the later prehistory (c. 5600–400 BC) of the peninsula remains a relatively unknown subject for the wider world. The three recent volumes under review therefore provide the opportunity to outline current trends in research on the first farmers at the westernmost end of Europe and to assess what these contribute to wider understanding of the past. A common thread among the three volumes is that they are predominantly authored by local (Spanish and Portuguese) scholars but aimed at an international readership, addressing questions of global interest. They tackle essentially Iberian research issues, but some of these (e.g. monumental ditched enclosures, the emergence of unequal socio-political structures) are to be understood as pan-European phenomena.

The three volumes derive from diverse scholarly initiatives (although two are published by Routledge in the same monograph series). *The prehistory of Iberia: debating early social stratification and the state*, edited by Cruz Berrocal, García Sanjuán and Gilman, has its origin in the 2008 Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology. Its core section, part II, consists of 14 essays (all of regional focus except for one on Valencia de la Concepción) authored by leading Spanish and American scholars. These are bookended by three chapters of theoretical focus by the editors (part I) and an enlightening concluding section by Chris Scarre, who situates the subject matter in its wider European context (part III).

Recent prehistoric enclosures and funerary practices in Europe, edited by António C. de Valera, presents the proceedings of an international conference held in 2012 at the Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon. The 12 chapters address both individual sites and broader regional surveys and are authored by researchers, evenly balanced by those from Iberia and those from other countries. The contributors tackle the occurrence of human remains in Neolithic ditches from varied perspectives, with the results brought together and assessed in the concluding remarks by Márquez Romero and Jiménez Jáimez.

The third volume under review here, *The archaeology of Bronze Age Iberia* by Aranda, Montón-Subías and Sánchez Romero, provides a comprehensive and up-to-date synthesis of the El Argar culture (c. 2200–1550 BC). The authors address the key themes of Argaric research in six concise chapters: the history of fieldwork and interpretation; the spatio-temporal definition of El Argar; landscape and settlement archaeology; agrarian production and craftsmanship; funerary rituals; and socio-political strategies. It represents an ambitious and complex endeavour, taking some four years to complete.

Collectively, these three volumes provide a benchmark against which to assess the current state of research

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on the later prehistory of the Iberian Peninsula. A key issue is the contradictory nature of local research, which is open to international involvement but, at the same time, held back by established constraints. Iberian authors are more present than ever in international forums and journals, and they increasingly contribute to publications initiated by North American and other European scholars. There are not, however, many English-language volumes edited or coordinated by Portuguese or Spanish archaeologists. Although central and northern European scholars have published in English for several decades, Iberian archaeologists only started to engage in such a challenging enterprise in the 1990s. Following these pioneer editorial ventures, the last decade has witnessed a more significant increase in such publications. Accounts in Portuguese or Spanish remain indispensable for the dissemination of research within these national milieus, but for a growing number of Iberian archaeologists, this is not enough. The cross-fertilisation of ideas, the prospects of trans-disciplinary collaboration, and the potential for funding (especially since 2008) have no national frontiers nowadays.

Despite acknowledging these issues, Iberian archaeology remains deeply entrenched in parochial frameworks, facilitated by endogamous political and academic systems, which counteract its efforts towards internationalisation. Research is habitually too local (micro-regional) in scope; inter-regional comparisons and macro-regional (let alone pan-Iberian) accounts are rare. It is, therefore, difficult for international audiences to get an overall impression of what is going on. In some parts of Iberia, the absence of competing approaches has led to unique—and therefore uncontested—interpretive accounts by a single dominant researcher or research group, resulting in stagnation or impoverishment of ideas. This is particularly the case in the northern half of Iberia, where research started later and has seldom benefited, save exceptions, from the fieldwork and interest of foreign scholars. Even worse, the treatment of archaeological evidence is often arbitrarily conditioned by anachronistic frameworks; for example, political or administrative boundaries, such as the Portugal-Spain border or the 17 Spanish autonomous regions. This general situation is reflected by some of the contributions in the two edited volumes under review. The absence of any discussion of material from Portugal in *The prehistory of Iberia*, although regrettable, speaks of

broader structural problems for which the editors cannot be blamed.

Such drawbacks aside, the study of Iberian later prehistory is characterised by the healthy coexistence of diverse scholarly ways of doing archaeology. These involve a variety of theoretical perspectives and methodological procedures, unevenly represented in the three books under review. Thus, roughly speaking, the current research agenda is shaped by three principal standpoints: a) culture-historical archaeology, which despite declining still represents the majority of the field; b) functionalist or materialist approaches concentrating on long-term trends and generalising socio-economic processes; and c) sporadic critical attempts aimed at complementing established readings. Traditional culture-historical approaches still dominate amongst many senior academics, museum staff and field archaeologists within the public and commercial sectors. As these practitioners rarely contribute to academic periodicals or events beyond their immediate circle, they are the least visible group within the international sphere. In fact, only two or three contributions (both Iberian and from other European regions) in the reviewed books might be related to this strand.

In sharp contrast, the second trend is represented by numerous generalist approaches. These surged in the early 1980s in response to a renewed agenda intended to overcome long-held and unsustainable ideas and methods of enquiry. Social complexity, and its archaeological correlates, is a thriving theme for this group. Unsurprisingly, nine papers in *The prehistory of Iberia* and three in *Recent prehistoric enclosures and funerary practices in Europe* adopt such a generalist perspective. This wide umbrella term, however, covers disparate and even opposing intellectual positions, such as functionalist (processual) and historical materialist (Marxist) approaches. The pervasiveness of Marxism in Spanish archaeology—contrary to Portugal and most other European and Western countries—lies mainly in its role as the leading ideology against the Francoist dictatorship (1939–1975).

In the study of south-east Iberia, Marxism has been seminal. Here, materialist advocates disagree on the scale of socio-political hierarchisation achieved by later prehistoric societies: some (Nocete, Molina, Mederos) holds to a hypothesis defending a state-type organisation as early as the Chalcolithic, during the third millennium BC; others (Chapman, Lull, Micó, Risch) argue for the identification of the El Argar

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society as a state-like polity in the Early Bronze Age during the first half of the second millennium BC; and finally, other scholars (Gilman, Ramos Millán, Díaz-del-Río) accept only relatively small and ephemeral chiefdoms as the climax of this evolutionary process in the Early Bronze Age. It is a pity that only proponents of the last point of view are represented in *The prehistory of Iberia*. Consequently, despite its subtitle—*Debating early social stratification and the state*—the potential for a true debate is not realised. In sum, the main contribution of such perspectives has been to provide food for thought, moving the debate forward, beyond the traditional concerns about cultural definition.

One side effect of this development of theoretically informed deterministic accounts of socio-political dynamics, particularly in the 1990s, has been the untenable identification of too many chiefs in later prehistoric Iberia with the material evidence at hand. It is my view that disregard for the nature and visibility of the archaeological record has a lot to do with the perception of social complexity. Thus, contributors in *The prehistory of Iberia* dealing with Atlantic and northern Iberia must confront problematic evidence, such as elusive settlement and the absence of normative burials, ultimately leading to minimalist readings in political terms. Terminology coined for analysing nineteenth-century industrial realities—primary producers, means of production, superstructure—seems particularly inappropriate for the awkward empirical basis from beyond the Iberian south-east, as the account on the Cantabrian region shows.

Finally, in the last two decades some interpretive or more humanistic-oriented accounts (akin to the post-processual approaches in the Anglophone archaeological scene) have appeared in Iberian academia. They are eclectic, but stem from a common dissatisfaction with cultural history and maximalist or diluted grand narrative (i.e. processual and Marxist) approaches. In France such an intellectual attitude has had hardly any impact (Coudart 1999), yet Portuguese and Spanish archaeologists are slowly but increasingly embracing it. This perspective is well represented by six contributions to each of the edited

volumes. The *Recent prehistoric enclosures and funerary practices in Europe* volume, for example, addresses practices that are poorly served by conventional theory (e.g. ritual, domestic, funerary), and prompts more reflexive approaches to human remains in contingent contexts. Similarly, the overview of Argaric societies provided in *The archaeology of Bronze Age Iberia* not only compiles and critically reviews state-of-the-art approaches, but also offers an elaborate theoretical apparatus adhering to this alternative position. Its original arguments, inspired by manifold intellectual backdrops (e.g. feminism, gender and age studies, post-colonial theory, quotidian life and subsistence activities) will contribute to global theoretical debates. Aranda, Montón-Subías and Sánchez Romero masterfully accomplish their aim of supplementing dominant large-scale accounts with finer grained, small-scale narratives through their attentiveness to the range of variability in Argaric contexts. They also satisfactorily integrate the archaeologically exceptional (e.g. deviant burials, one-off fortifications, unskilled vessels made in abnormal circumstances), reclaiming the heuristic value of such phenomena, which traditionally have been downplayed. This approach allows a more subtle and self-critical understanding of Argaric society, giving rise to their claim of previously undetected strategies of resistance and the routine negotiation of social identities operating through face-to-face interactions.

In sum, these three volumes encapsulate the vitality of recent research on later prehistoric Iberia and its relevance to the global archaeological community. Iberian archaeology is still a long way behind the most dynamic Anglo-American and northern European academic milieus, but these books demonstrate how to proceed and what can be expected in the near future.

Reference

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