

Book reviews

BRUNO BIZOT & GÉRARD SAUZADE (ed.). *Le dolmen de l'Ubac à Goult (Vaucluse). Archéologie, environnement et évolution des gestes funéraires dans un contexte stratifié* (Mémoires de la Société préhistorique française 61). 2015. 248 pages, numerous colour and b&w illustrations. Paris: Société préhistorique française; 2-913745-61-X paperback €30.



This volume reports on the archaeological investigation of a Late Neolithic long-chambered dolmen accidentally discovered near Goult in Provence, France,

during a flood of the Calavon River in 1994. The monument was sealed beneath thick sedimentary deposits that have favoured the excellent preservation of the remains, a situation that sometimes occurs in the foothills of mountainous massifs; the megalithic tomb of Reguers de Seró in the province of Lleida, Spain, was preserved and discovered in similar circumstances.

Part 1 of this book presents a well-documented and detailed overview of the Neolithic funerary complexes of Provence, reviewing the history of research and the current state of knowledge. This is a valuable summary for those interested in recent work on the prehistory of this region. Part 2 turns to the site of Ubac itself. The first six chapters of this section describe the discovery, excavation and the architecture of the monument, and then outline the changing environment of the site and its setting. Two large chapters—comprising almost half of the entire volume—then examine the human skeletal remains, including depositional processes and palaeopathologies (several of the appendices also focus on these skeletal remains). The third and final part of the volume consists of short chapters that put the results into perspective, mainly on a regional scale, with particular emphasis on the human remains. The original excavation, the results and the rigour of the argument advanced are all exemplary.

This volume expands our knowledge of regional sequences for the end of the Neolithic in Provence, and, in particular, for funerary and burial practices. The Ubac dolmen was constructed after 3300 BC, and continued in use until *c.* 2600 BC. It forms part of a series of funerary monuments in western Provence, such as Château Blanc at Ventabren, which is often placed at the beginning of the regional megalithic tradition. Sites such as the Dolmen de Coutignargues feature a semi-subterranean burial chamber, with drystone-wall construction, stone roof slabs and a trapezoidal plan; and these sites are similar to those attested at the Arles-Fontvieille group. To the west of the Rhone, in contrast, burial chambers were constructed above, not below, ground, and surrounded by cairns with external drystone facings. The Ubac dolmen was enclosed within a circular earthen mound with a stone covering, delimited by two concentric circles of small standing slabs. This layout is reminiscent of many megalithic tombs in Iberia. In Navarre, in the southern Pyrenees, for example, the semi-subterranean Longar hypogaeum was constructed with drystone walls, with slabs lining the entrance corridor and an imposing capstone over the chamber; this hypogaeum contained the bones of about 100 individuals, at least one of whom died between 2630 and 2500 BC.

The burial chamber of the Ubac dolmen was initially about 2.9m long and 1.5m wide, with a maximum internal height of about 1.6m; the entrance passage leading to it was very short. The chamber contained the remains of at least 40 individuals. Three or four phases of funerary activity have been identified through the application of the archaeoanthatological principles advanced over recent decades by Henri Duday and his team. A detailed analysis of the human remains, such as the taphonomic processes affecting the dispersal of individual skeletons, leads to a careful reconstruction of the sequence of actions performed during the deposition and management of the deceased's bones. This approach, impressively applied here, has been neglected for too long in published studies of these southern dolmens. The resulting discussion is extremely interesting, and the material on which it is based will no doubt continue to yield further

insights with future methodological developments in, for example, bioarchaeology. Further radiocarbon dating, and the use of Bayesian analysis, would be particularly welcome.

As often in our discipline, a particularly good research project raises new questions. In this case, the next step is to consider whether walls built of mud-brick might have complemented the surviving stone structures that are the immediate object of attention. Studies of burial practices have recently focused on the human body, but the architecture of the monuments within which they were contained also warrants detailed study. Work on the Boileau hypogeum has also drawn attention to the layout of funerary objects within tombs, particularly personal ornaments. Further work on the setting of the Ubac dolmen in its local landscape is precluded by the thick covering of colluvium across the surrounding area. As a result, the hypothesis that the construction of the monument was preceded by an individual burial, possibly associated with the remains of a ceramic deposit and two now broken stelae, must remain conjectural. None of this, however, detracts in any way from the high quality of this work, which will probably become a point of reference with relevance well beyond the region of Provence. This book can be recommended to anyone working on, or interested in, megalithic structures across Western Europe.

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GLENN M. SCHWARTZ (ed.). *Rural archaeology in early urban northern Mesopotamia: excavations at Tell al-Raqa'i* (Monumenta Archaeologica 36). 2015. xxvii+663 pages, numerous b&w illustrations. Los Angeles (CA): Cotsen Institute of Archaeology; 978-1-938770-04-3 hardback \$89.



This substantial volume provides a final report on eight seasons of excavations at the small third-millennium BC village site of Tell al-Raqa'i in northern Syria (the editor's preface notes that the project's co-director, Hans Curvers, plans to publish his own interpretations in

a separate monograph). Raqa'i was investigated from 1986–1993 as part of a multi-national programme of rescue excavations at a series of sites along both banks of the Khabur River, south of modern Hasseke and not far from the major Bronze Age urban centre of Tell Brak. The research agenda underpinning this project from its inception is that of 'rural archaeology', about which the volume's editor has published a significant amount.

Schwartz situates the work at Raqa'i within the context of urban-rural dynamics, pointing out that much research on the development of urbanisation and socio-political complexity in ancient Mesopotamia has hitherto focused on major cities while ignoring the potential contribution of the investigation of rural settlements. Although large-scale archaeological surveys have more effectively negotiated this concern, very few small-scale settlements have received systematic excavation. Schwartz stresses the need to view ancient Mesopotamian societies not so much as urban *vs* rural, but rather as a continuum of city and countryside, with rural communities integrated in manifold ways—economic, political, cultural—with their local urban centres as well as within broader networks of regional and inter-regional engagement.

The volume adopts the structure of a conventional archaeological report progressing from discussion of the research framework, through the stratigraphy and architecture, ceramics, small finds, burials and chipped stone, metal, botanical and faunal evidence, to a final summary chapter. There is variability in the depth and scope of each chapter, inevitable in a multi-author volume, with the ceramics (102 pages) and small finds (141 pages) receiving the most exhaustive and informative treatments. It is notable that the distinctive incised 'Ninevite 5' ceramic vessels are most commonly associated with the proposed temple structure of Level 3, an association matched at nearby Tell Brak where such vessels were also found in significant association with a small shrine or temple of mid third-millennium BC date. The chapters on plant and animal remains are also full of insights into the organisation of the diet and storage economy at Raqa'i and its intersection with the wider world, including nearby sites such as Tell 'Atij, Tell Brak and Mari.

The most significant of the project's results relates to the exposure of a large area of a mid third-millennium BC village in Levels 4–3, coupled with the tentative identification of the site as a specialised grain storage facility serving regional communities.

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