



Review Article

From Neolithic to Copper Age: two tales of change in the Carpathian Basin

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FLORIN DRAȘOVEAN & WOLFRAM SCHIER (ed.). 2020. *Uivar “Gomița”: a prehistoric tell settlement in the Romanian Banat. Vol. I: site, architecture, stratigraphy and dating*. Rahden: Marie Leidorf; 978-3-8646-687-7 hardback €79.80.

WILLIAM A. PARKINSON, ATTILA GYUCHA & RICHARD W. YERKES (ed.). 2021. *Bikeri: two Copper Age villages on the Great Hungarian Plain*. Los Angeles (CA): Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press; 978-1-95044-616-2 hardback €130.

Uivar “Gomița”, a long-awaited and overdue first volume (of a planned set of three), presents, in seven chapters, a comprehensive account of the results of archaeological research on the site of Uivar, Romania. It reports on 10 seasons of investigation into the north-eastern periphery of the Vinča Culture phenomenon and the occurrence of tell settlements in the second half of the sixth millennium BC. Multiple contributors—mostly members of the original research team—present a well-defined case study of a Late Neolithic tell settlement, starting from general questions about the tell phenomenon in South-east Europe and the Neolithic of the Banat area, where “*Gomița*” is located (Chapter 1).

The middle section of the volume, and the largest by far, extending over Chapters 3 and 4, presents the excavation methods and results. It is a meticulous account of strategy, organisation and the contexts discovered. Whilst organised as a classic excavation report, listing a myriad of individual contexts, layers and buildings in various areas explored over the 10 seasons of fieldwork, it is indispensable reading for any archaeologist involved in tell settlement research, even outside this specific region and period. The descriptions of the archaeological contexts and layers provide an introduction to the chapter on the statistical analysis of the finds distribution (Chapter 5), presenting a “stratigraphically and taphonomically oriented evaluation of the comprehensive collection of data” (p. 445).

The last two chapters of the volume are by far the most important. The first provides a chronological framework for the archaeological narrative of the Late Neolithic tell settlement on Uivar, but also for the wider Banat region surrounding the tell. Written by a team of archaeologists not directly associated with the original excavation team, but rather associated with *The times of their lives* (TOTL) project (Whittle 2018), it explores a series of specific objectives: from the creation of a diachronic narrative of the site’s development; through the establishment of the construction chronology and the development of the defensive

system; to the temporal relationships between the occupation of the tell and of the surrounding flat settlements; and finally, the pottery sequence dating (p. 493).

The superbly written first part of this chapter, starting with a Bayesian approach, continues into the Uivar case study, where 182 radiocarbon dates of known stratigraphical position are analysed, with the assistance of the detailed stratigraphic sequences documented at the site; and the results are reported broken down by area or discovery. Building on the settlement's chronological narrative, the following section of the chapter presents a provisional regional perspective. The area explored encompasses the Banat region, at the south-east end of the Carpathian Basin, nestled between the Tisza River to the north and west and the Carpathian Mountains to the south and the east. Another 109 radiocarbon dates from multiple sites across the region are analysed. This establishes a cross-site comparison and helps identify which sites and their respected settlement phases could have existed contemporaneously. The final chapter (7), a synthesis, summarises the previous chapters, before focusing on the cultural dynamics of the region. The story of the cohabitation of various material culture traditions in the region offers new evidence for a better understanding of the complex picture of the Middle and the Late Neolithic (5300–4500 cal BC) in the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin. The mixing of pottery manufacturing traditions and ornamental decorations illustrates, for example, how tells were not isolated islands within the emptiness of the vast surrounding flatlands, but rather, vibrant hubs where people met, lived, traded and died for centuries, passing on and receiving particular cultural practices to and from others.

The second volume under review here, *Bikeri: two Copper Age villages on the Great Hungarian Plain*, summarises the results of the *Körös Regional Archaeological Project's* (KRAP) investigations of the social, political and economic changes in the Körös region of the south-eastern part of the Great Hungarian Plain during the transition from the Neolithic to the Copper Age (c. 4600–4400 cal BC). The Körös region lies approximately 140km north of the Romanian Banat examined in the *Uivar Gomilă* volume but is geographically similar to it and also shares a similar set of prehistoric traditions as part of the prehistoric complexes of the south-east edge of the Carpathian Basin. The volume is organised in 17 chapters and five major sections. It presents a detailed insight into the emergence of the Copper Age in the Great Hungarian Plain based on archaeological research at two sites, Vésztő-Bikeri and Körösladány-Bikeri, as points of reference. The KRAP project, with an even longer history of research than that of Uivar, started in 1998, building on the results of previous research conducted by Hungarian archaeologists in the second half of the twentieth century (Jankovich & Ecsedy 1989). The project sought answers to specific questions on the organisation and size of Early Copper Age settlements, their life spans, economic organisation and production, and trade and exchange networks within. Finally, one of the more important questions posed during the project was the identification of the factors that played the most significant role in the transition from the Late Neolithic to the Early Copper Age.

The second section of the volume consists of five chapters that present the results of landscape, soil and hydrological research in the area, alongside non-invasive archaeological techniques, such as surface collection, soil chemistry, and geophysical and remote sensing. This is followed by the third section, consisting of two chapters: a detailed account of excavation methods and results; and the settlement chronology and layout.

The fourth section consists of eight chapters illustrating the material culture of the Vésztő-Bikeri and Körösladány-Bikeri sites, but also the results of elemental, mineral and petrographic analyses of the sources of clay and stone. The remaining chapters, with analyses of the faunal and botanical material, complement the reconstruction of daily life and the environment at the beginning of the Early Copper Age. The fifth and final section of the book is written by the editors and contains concluding remarks, including a narrative account of the end of the Neolithic and the onset of the Early Copper Age.

In conclusion, being the sole planned volume on the project results at Bikeri, it differs slightly in organisation from the *Uivar "Gomilă"* volume, although some chapters are similar in form. Here, chapters that are omitted from this first *Uivar "Gomilă"* volume are neatly complemented by those found in the *Bikeri* volume, which often compare back to the Late Neolithic period.

Both volumes provide excellent source material for an overview of a millennium that yielded some of the most important building blocks in the foundation of European prehistory—a settled way of life, food cultivation and metallurgy. Perhaps the greatest contribution of both volumes, however, is the realisation of the numerous changes that occurred during the transition period, when long-lived, large tell settlements were abandoned, bringing about the end of the nucleated settlement patterns of the Late Neolithic period. This change gave rise to the highly dispersed pattern of more numerous smaller settlements of the Early Copper Age (p. 381). The sharp drop in settlement size suggests that extended corporate groups from the Late Neolithic tell settlements were most likely the founders of these dispersed settlements, separated by variably sized stretches of uninhabited land. A certain level of population continuity still existed, as the dispersed sites still occupied areas of the Late Neolithic settlement clusters, besides newly established settlements in previously uninhabited areas. This new pattern of habitation clearly shows that by the onset of the Early Copper Age in the region, certain communities of the period had adapted to the parts of previously unused and highly heterogeneous landscapes of the region (p. 382).

The radiocarbon dating evidence presented in both volumes indicates that the Early Copper Age way of life appeared earlier than previously thought, suggesting it took several centuries for it to become the dominant tradition in this area of the Great Hungarian Plain. This understanding corroborates a change that was not as abrupt as has often been suggested by previous researchers (e.g. Bognár-Kutzián 1972), but rather a gradual evolution of new traditions rooted in old ways. Adding to this idea of gradual change, the two volumes also demonstrate that, despite their obvious size differences, settlements in both periods continued to show significant organisational similarities alongside some variations. While most of the settlements appear to have been fortified, a certain proportion in nearby areas are unfortified. Strong cultural connections can also be seen in identical construction techniques, settlement spatial organisation and the continuing practice of intramural burials alongside newly established extramural, formal cemeteries.

The differences between the periods are most clearly recognisable in aspects of subsistence strategies, which show a complex mixed farming and herding economy in the Early Copper Age, despite initial assumptions made by earlier researchers (e.g. Bognár-Kutzián 1972; Bökönyi 1974), suggesting a more mobile, pastoralist economy. Furthermore, even though the domesticates are the dominant animal species, Vésztő-Bikeri and Körösladány-Bikeri

indicate that the reliance on cattle—a very typical feature of the Late Neolithic period, as seen even in Uivar—changes in the Early Copper Age to a mixed, more balanced animal herding system consisting of multiple other domesticated species. Similarly, in agriculture, it appears that the Early Copper Age strategies are still rooted in local Late Neolithic practices (p. 384), but with innovations that were tailored to fit the local environment.

A final illustration of the changes that occurred during the transitional period is found in the *Bikeri* volume, in relation to changes in the trade and exchange networks that show access to raw materials such as lithics and exclusive material such as seashells declining with the transformation and reorganisation of trade at the beginning of the Early Copper Age. This is specifically witnessed in the almost complete decline in long-distance exchange contacts that were very common in the Late Neolithic period.

To conclude, both volumes are worthy additions to the enlarging corpus of research data and knowledge of the Late Neolithic and Early Copper Age periods of the south-east Carpathian Basin. And as we look forward to two forthcoming volumes containing more in-depth insight into the Uivar research results, the *Bikeri* volume represents a fitting end to a well-known long-term project of the region and is likely to inspire new generations of archaeologists to strike new questions and paths into the subject of the transitional period from the Late Neolithic to the Early Copper Age at the midpoint of the fifth millennium BC. Both volumes will continue to serve as foundation stones for future research into the phenomenon of dissolution of complex Late Neolithic tell societies and the emergence of scattered, small scale, mobile Early Copper Age communities of the Carpathian Basin.

References

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