

Review of: Ohlrau, R. (2020). Maidanets'ke: Development and decline of a Trypillia mega-site in Central Ukraine. (Scales of Transformation, 7). Leiden: Sidestone. Paperback, 326 pp., 141 illus. (bw), 93 illus. (fc). ISBN 9789088908484. Open access: <https://www.sidestone.com/books/maidanets-ke> [14.7.2020].

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This book of René Ohlrau comes as a part of a series of monographs and journal papers promoting the results of the long-term German involvement in the investigations of the Trypillia phenomenon in Ukraine, with special focus on the megasite of Maidanets'ke. The numerous previous publications, that are often referred to in this book, provide a very useful background to the issues discussed by the author and complement the results reported here. This perhaps may explain the rather short introduction to a book with such an ambitious title. Four research questions and two complementary aims are set out in the introduction: (1) extensive radiocarbon sampling to establish the number of contemporaneous features on the site (chapter 6); (2) comprehensive analysis of a completely excavated house (part of chapter 4); (3) detailed commentary on multi-phased kiln excavations (part of chapter 4); (4) establishing the character of the enclosure (part of chapter 4). These, and his two aims "*palaeo-demography*" (chapter 7) and "*investigating the regional context of Maidanets'ke*" (chapter 8) are indeed largely fulfilled and form the bulk of the book. Apart from the obligatory scene-setting of Trypillia in time and space (chapter 2), Ohlrau does more than he pledges in the introduction by discussing Maidanets'ke investigations in the last century (chapter 3), the renewed investigations there since 2011 (chapter 4), pottery analysis (chapter 5) and the implication of his research for the wider mega-site debate (chapter 9).

The book is well illustrated and informative, from context descriptions and artefact illustrations to geophysics plots and summary tables. And if praising the level of detail of both contextual and visual presentation may seem redundant to the Western reader, I cannot stress enough how important it is for Trypillian archaeology to maintain modern standards of excavation, recording and publication. Perhaps the only small recommendation that could be made is for the captions to be more extensive for the benefit of less statistically-minded readers. However, there is no doubt that the way the information is presented here will facilitate future analyses.

The volume will also be of general interest to a wider audience, not just for narrow specialists

in Trypillian archaeology, in terms of the presentation of house architecture, kiln varieties, pottery analyses and a concise introduction into the megasite phenomenon. There are many detailed discussions that either refute (e.g. the presence of 'inhabited' walls) or support traditional views (e.g. two-storey architecture) that are very important but what deserves most merit are two major contributions – the formal chronological modelling with the subsequent demographic modelling and the investigation of the regional context.

The 67 radiocarbon dates are modelled within a Bayesian framework with an excellent step-by-step discussion of each sample and overall, both the sampling strategy and the formal chronological model, are tremendous progress over previous attempts. On the basis of these results, Maidanets'ke lasted for 350 years and had four occupational phases, peaking in phase 3 between 3800-3700 cal BC. I personally would have liked to see some discussion of the long probability distributions and the nature of the calibration curve at the beginning of the 4th millennium BC. Also, a relevant commentary with implications is needed on fig. 144, where the author seems to suggest that at least four houses in Maidanets'ke have lasted for more than 200 years, rather than just presenting the figures in the text on p. 226.

The radiocarbon dates are then used for the purposes of palaeo-demography. The chosen method (SHENNAN, 2009) to calculate the number of coeval dwellings (p. 234) has as many critics as supporters and the issues with this approach are far from settled (e.g. CONTRERAS & MEADOWS, 2014). The author is certainly aware of these issues as he is trying to mitigate the shortcomings (by not using the probability distribution of the calibrated dates, among other things) and it is most unfortunate that the online appendices were not accessible at the time of writing of this review (July 2020) that would have enabled the reviewer to assess the steps more critically. As the current estimates are a huge improvement in comparison with previous figures (e.g. OHLRAU ET AL., 2016, among others), and despite the debatable practice of using summed radiocarbon calibrations as demographic proxies, they could be accepted with caution.

I cannot agree more with the author that, in order to understand the megasites, we need to look at smaller sites (p. 14). He opted for complete geophysics on four smaller broadly contemporary sites in the Maidanets'ke vicinity and partial geophysics on two larger sites – one close to Maidanets'ke, the other some distance away. The results show that all but one have a circo-radial planning (as the author calls it), all have a variety of large buildings

and three have kiln anomalies. On this basis, it is claimed that “no accentuated differences in institutions or economy is apparent between smaller and larger settlements” (p. 256). This is an extraordinary claim and I am not sure that archaeologists dealing with the development of institutions or economy would accept that geophysical evidence alone is enough to draw such conclusions! But the author does not stop there and argues that “‘mega-sites’ are nothing more than an upscaled version of the smaller sites based on the same kind of planning principles” (p. 254). I shall return to the upscaling further below, but here it should be stressed that – until a similar high-precision geophysical programme produces a representative sample (not the current mixture of partial and complete geophysics of handful of sites of various sizes from all periods randomly dispersed across the whole Cucuteni-Trypillia distribution) of small Trypillia A, BI and BII sites – a better way to present the similarity in planning principles is “from the transition period BII/CI onwards, some small sites present a down-scaled version of mega-sites”.

Gradually, the reader will sense that there is a difference in the approach to the investigation and interpretation of megasites by the three major groups of scholars involved in their research in the last decade – Ukrainian, German and British. I always found that to be a creative tension and inspiration to improve my arguments. The author has chosen a different strategy. Where his results agree with the Ukrainian views, this is underlined loud and clearly; where they diverge, the issue is tacitly avoided. For example, the residential mobility suggested by Ohlrau (p. 236) is in line with the long-held view by Ukrainian archaeologists; however, he fails to reconcile his newly proposed phasing of Maidanets’ke with the traditional 50 to 80 years cycle of mobility. Normally, I would not have dwelt on such discrepancies, if it was not for the amusing, if mildly annoying, and constant misrepresentation of British views and results with a tendency to undermine them. Apart from several obvious untruths (e.g. GAYDARSKA [2016; 2017]) questions the urban character of the ‘mega-sites’ [p. 280] or the British team has never questioned the construction of kilns at the other sites as suggested by Ohlrau (just the Nebelivka kiln)), the author seem to be unaware of a research discourse based on tacking back and forth (WYLIE, 1989; 2000) multiple (and sometimes contradictory) aspects of the archaeological evidence, as well as theoretical and methodological considerations in order to create a plausible framework for interpretation that is never static and open for reconsideration in the face of new and ever-growing evidence.

In my opinion, such a misunderstanding of the British stance derives from the superficial engage-

ment with a research direction with which the author is not comfortable. The sentences mentioned as early as the introduction (p. 13) that “The question is, therefore, not primarily whether the Trypillia ‘mega-site’ phenomenon represent cities or not. Instead, their distinct settlement pattern and intra-site development are studied in the following thesis” are very revealing of Ohlrau’s unease with the urban topic, which is palpable throughout the volume! One of the last sentences in the book (p. 286) explains why he feels compelled to provide a commentary on the issue – “this conclusion presents a main shift in the debate in which the urban character of these settlements was hardly questioned.” Such statement cannot be further from the truth! The closest any of the German team came to urbanity is a brief mention, and never seriously pursued as a research question, of “agricultural towns” as quoted by Ohlrau himself as well (p. 279). His own summary of how Trypillia sites were interpreted (p. 261-281) reveals a very wide-ranging and contradictory set of views, in which the “urbanists” certainly play a part if hardly a dominant one.

The author’s own standing on the matter relies on two valuable insights – Michael Smith’s (2016) view on cross-cultural urbanism and Jennifer Birch’s (2013) inspirational work on aggregation. In order to disprove the urban character of Maidanets’ke, Ohlrau goes through M. Smith’s criteria in the hope of demonstrating that, although featuring some of the desired characteristics, the site falls short of the “package” that will see Maidanets’ke as an urban settlement. Space prevents a detailed deconstruction of the author’s arguments, so just two points will be raised. First, one of M. Smith’s criteria is “craft production” with the intention of wider product distribution – that Ohlrau has reduced to the presence/absence of pottery kilns. Thus, the presence of kilns/kiln anomalies at smaller sites undermines the “craft production” at Maidanets’ke with its multiple kiln anomalies. This is a huge leap in argumentation since, in the present state of research, it cannot be confirmed or denied whether pottery produced at Maidanets’ke was distributed to smaller sites. Besides, kilns per se (or any other facility for pot-firing) are part and parcel of human experience since the Neolithic; thus if they are to be used in the debate over craft specialization, other factors should be considered, such as the volume of production, number/concentration of firing facilities at a given site, demand and consumption patterns and so on. Even more importantly, what turns pottery-making into a craft is the quality of the production and Trypillia pottery is renowned for its high quality. Neither of these issues is discussed in the outright denial of craft production at

Maidanets'ke. The second point concerns the selective use of M. Smith's (2016, 159-60) argumentation and the full quote should read as follows: *"In this approach the relationship between the urban traits and the status of 'urban' or 'city' is not fixed or rigid. As any polythetic scheme, there are no 'necessary' traits that must present in every case of urbanism, and there is no absolute quantitative criterion for urbanism (e.g., any site with twelve of the traits can be called a city)."* I have noted 11 of M. Smith's traits at Maidanets'ke: population, area, density, civic architecture or intermediate-order temple (I suspect that actually both are present that will make 12 traits), craft production, connective infrastructure, formal public space, planning of epicenter, social diversity, neighbourhoods and imports. There are a further three traits whose teasing out through further targeted research may swing the pendulum towards an urban character – agriculture within the settlement (not all houses were standing together at the same time, so space was available), fortification (while palisades were not documented, the efforts to create a c. 4.7 km causewayed enclosure used the kind of large-scale labour required for fortification) and gates (M. Smith does not mention monumental gates and the nature of the enclosure creates points of entry/exit that are gates in the broader sense). In other words, if one's starting point is to undermine any clear and not so clear traits of urbanity, the evidence can be twisted that way. If, on the contrary, one wants to pursue the city hypothesis, the evidence can be steered in this direction. This is not to say that the evidence in Maidanets'ke (and at other megasites for that matter) is so inconclusive that it can be bent at will. It is to underline once again the complex nature of these sites that require theoretical and methodological commitment, not recurrent attempts to lock them in a drawer and throw away the key.

The proposed interpretation of Trypillia megasites as aggregation settlements once again conveniently misses the point that the sites for which this term was coined (BIRCH, 2013) are substantially smaller than the megasites, they lack the formalization of the built environment observed at megasites, and this settlement form is of much shorter duration than the 500 to 800 years duration of megasites. There have been other attempts to apply this North American model to European prehistory (e.g. BÁNFFY ET AL., 2016), so future refinement of the coalescent communities approach may prove instructive for the Trypillia megasites. At present, however, its application to Trypillia megasites is rather superficial and unconvincing.

Together with its achievements, the volume also presents missed opportunities. First and foremost,

the economic and social implications of scaling-up are entirely overlooked, which is ironic given that the book is published in the series of *"Scales of transformation"*. Ecological implications are briefly assessed (pp. 274-276), mainly relying on previous investigations focusing on whether such scaling-up is possible (e.g. carrying capacities) and possible human impact (e.g. the creation of a cultural steppe). The current study conveniently avoids the fact that the improved chronological model of Maidenest'ke demonstrates that there are now three megasites (Nebelivka, Taljanky and Maidanets'ke) located at c. 20 km from each other that overlap not just by few years but perhaps by centuries. There must have been consequences for such a concentration of large sites that is passed over in silence. Instead, the focus is on the growth of Maidanets'ke and the suggested residential mobility is drawn from 20 smaller communities. If we accept that, then logically the other two megasites must have undergone similar aggregation processes. Where have all these people come from, why settle on three closely located sites, was there any competition for resources, power and influence, how were conflicts resolved, and what is the underpinning social order that is allowing the continuation of similar coeval developments? I know from first-hand experience that there are no easy answers to these questions but avoiding them is not an option. Can the repeated inconclusive Correspondence Analyses results in producing a clear typo-chronology be seen not as a failure but an opportunity to re-visit the pottery assemblages from these sites and with the help of the Ukrainian pottery specialists to ask the hitherto unimaginable questions – can these three sites be contemporary (as confirmed by the radiocarbon dates)? Were the stylistic ceramic differences underpinned by different identities in space rather than different identities in time? This is just one of many research possibilities that interrogation of what we already have could be very productive. The field is also greatly in need of new targeted fieldwalking programmes, surveys and dating programmes that are only possible in a climate of mutual understanding and cooperation that will bring us closer to understanding the unravelling settlement pattern. Otherwise, we are left with a patchwork of disjointed claims that may leave the wider audience bewildered by the disharmonious Ukrainian-British-German chorus.

The second missed opportunity is to think creatively of the effects of scaled-up living, since living on a one-ha site can hardly be the same as living on a 195-ha site. We all have an experience of how human interaction changes if one has dinner at home with the family, attending a wedding of 200 people or a conference dinner of 1,000 dele-

gates. And this is just one aspect of the effects of many people living together. If for the author the co-existence of 39 households (the mean number of dwellings from the four newly surveyed sites) and 1,520 households (phase 3 in Maidanets'ke) is comparable, if not the same experience, in terms of food production, subsistence practices, waste management, logistics, social interaction, etc., the least he could have done is to enlighten the rest of us still baffled by such (apparently sustainable) up-scaling. One of several contradictions in this book is that, on the one hand, Ohlrau goes a long way to argue that megasites such as Maidanets'ke lacked any wider social impact (p. 257), yet, on the other, he claims that 20 small communities congregated there (p. 254)! Why would people aggregate at a place that had no wider significance? The lack of theoretical engagement with settlement aggregation is bewildering: what were megasites if they were not social attractors for members of many other communities?

The overall impression is that the initial 'awe' of megasites (p. 11) is not matched by the deflated end-product (interpretation) that puts Maidanets'ke exactly where it was before 2011 (if not pre-1980) – an over-grown village. Although these words are not used, these are the implications of the final sentence (p. 286). “‘Concerning the question of development and decline, Maidanets'ke represents a site that developed from a causewayed enclosure towards an aggregated settlement in which several communities came together and grew beyond its originally planned limits before it was finally abandoned.’” One wonders whether the recent investigations were worth it, if we finish where we started! The answer that they resulted in invaluable new environmental data, new, more precise geophysical plans and contextual data and new chronological and demographic modelling exacerbates even more the failure to arrive at new understanding.

I would like to finish on the hopeful note that archaeological curiosity and imagination will not betray these amazing sites! The megasites were, first and foremost, products of a profound leap in imagination by which people conceived of the possibility of a previously unknown form and structure. The imaginative breakthrough of the Trypillia people deserves a similar interpretative advance to bring us closer to the 4th millennium BC low-density urban revolution.

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