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SHENNAN 2015

ST. SHENNAN, Language, genes and cultural interaction. In: Ch. Fowler/J. Harding/D. Hofmann (Hrsg.), *The Oxford Handbook*

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WOLFRAM SCHIER / FLORIN DRAȘOVEAN (eds), Uivar “Gomilă”: A Prehistoric Settlement in the Romanian Banat. Vol. I: Site, Architecture, Stratigraphy and Dating. *Prähistorische Archäologie in Südosteuropa* volume 32. Verlag Marie Leidorf GmbH, Rahden/Westf. 2020. € 79.80. ISBN 978-3-89646-687-7. 585 pages with 562 figures and 15 tables.

Although the remarkable archaeological site of Uivar “Gomilă” appears as a distinct mound rising above the surrounding land on the Banat plain in Romania on nineteenth-century historical maps (see figs 1-3-04–05 in the present volume), the large-scale and systematic investigation of this multi-layered prehistoric settlement mound enclosed by the one-time channels of the River Bega was only begun in the late 1990s. Luckily for archaeological research, the settlement was made up of a stratified mound with Neolithic and Copper Age occupation layers, and a single-layer settlement was barely disturbed by earlier excavation activities without adequate documentation. The systematic surface survey of the Uivar site indicated that the settlement had been occupied not only during the Neolithic and the Copper Age but also in the Bronze and Iron Ages as well as in the medieval and post-medieval periods (tab. 2-1-02).

The German-Romanian multidisciplinary research project launched in 1998 for investigating the Uivar site was led by Florin Drașovean and Wolfram Schier, two highly experienced archaeologists, who combined their wide-ranging knowledge and expertise during the ten years of fieldwork on the site and its assessment, the first results of which are now available in the extensive publication reviewed here. The main methodological approach during the fieldwork, employed consistently in all investigated areas from 1999, was the rigorous application of the stratigraphic method to excavate the site according to layer interfaces and one-time cut features. This approach is illustrated in fig. 3-1-01 (cf. also pp. 549–550).

Another important aspect was that in 2013, the German-Romanian project was invited to join the ERC-funded “The Times of Their Lives” (ToTL) project led by Alasdair Whittle and Alex Bayliss, which in part resulted in a more precise absolute dating of the settlement layers of Uivar (chapter 6) and led to a critical review of all basic stratigraphic arguments (cf. p. 452, note 207). The inclusion of the Uivar site in the ToTL project meant that in addition to the primary archaeological insights drawn from the site’s investigation and the determination of its position within the regional Neolithic framework of the Banat, the biography of Uivar could also be woven into a broader European narrative (WHITTLE 2018, 8; 238–245). The initial findings of the site’s investi-

gation made their way into comprehensive surveys of certain aspects of the Neolithic (e. g. BRADLEY 2012, 140–141 fig. 49).

Conforming to its sub-title, Volume 1 of the planned site reports on Uivar “Gomilă” covers the site’s physical environment, its architectural remains, its stratigraphy and its chronology: these four main themes are organised into thematic units, followed by a synthesis. The volume has seven main chapters, written by the archaeologists and other specialists of the international team who worked on the site, which, in addition to F. Drașovean and W. Schier, included Christoph Menzler, Petru Urdea, Stefan Suhrbier, Helmut Becker, Silviane Scharl, Barbara Dammers, Alex Bayliss, Bisserka Gaydarska and Alasdair Whittle. The first volume will be followed by two other volumes covering the small finds, the site’s bioarchaeology, its one-time environment, the architecture of the buildings, and the archaeological typo-chronological assessment.

Following the Introduction, the book’s main part begins with Section 1 of chapter 1 (“The tell phenomenon in the archaeology of Southeast Europe and the Near East” by Ch. Menzler and W. Schier, pp. 6–12), a fairly brief discussion of this complex issue and its many aspects. The map showing the distribution of tells (fig. 1-1-01) was probably intended to provide a broad canvas of the tell phenomenon rather than to precisely map all the currently known tells – in fact, it differs little from Schier’s distribution map published a decade ago (SCHIER 2012, fig. 2). There would be nothing wrong with this in itself – however, there have been substantial changes regarding the presence of south-east European Neolithic and Copper Age tells along the northern fringes of the Carpathian Basin, as shown by sites such as Fajsz-Kovácsdomb along the Danube (RASSMANN et al. 2020, in particular 31–39) and others, which outline the expansion of this settlement type. The remainder of chapter 1 introduces the history of research into the Neolithic in the Banat and the landscape (pp. 13–30).

Chapter 2, the second main thematic unit, covers the site and its stratigraphy (pp. 31–73). The comparison of the information provided by the geophysical survey, the field survey, and the top-most excavated layers in order to detect possible correlations is a noteworthy innovative exercise for the site (pp. 63–73) as well as an exemplary case study in archaeological methodology, even if the results are very specific to local conditions such as earlier agricultural cultivation and soil conditions. The magnetograms provide a good overview of the overall layout of the Uivar site: a settlement mound and a single-layer settlement around it, as well as an enclosure system made up of ditches both within and around the settlement (D1–10; figs 2-2-02–05).

Chapter 3 is devoted to the strategy, the methodology, and the organisation of the excavations conducted between 1999 and 2009, with a brief description of each fieldwork season (pp. 75–135). Some important aspects of the fieldwork have already been mentioned in the above; another laudable aspect is the meticulous recording system introduced for documenting the archaeological features and the finds, as well as their interpretation as the fieldwork progressed, accompanied by concise colour illustrations. Tab. 3-5-01 provides a field diary-like overview of the most important fieldwork activities between 1998 and 2009, while fig. 3-5-01 shows the investigated areas on the site plan.

Chapter 4 (“The site and its stratigraphy”, pp. 137–441) is the lengthiest section and perhaps the most difficult to follow in the entire volume owing to the many diverse issues covered in it. The chapter is introduced by Schier’s overview of the methodological framework of tell excavations and the terminology employed at Uivar for the stratigraphy (pp. 137–155). Tab. 4-1-01 illustrates the hierarchy of stratigraphic terms used at Uivar and at four other tell settlements, two in South-West Asia and two in South-East Europe. Next, he discusses the different feature types and their relation to the stratigraphic terminology (tab. 4-1-02), followed by the taxonomy of the excavated features

(tab. 4-1-03). This section is rounded off by an overview of the find contexts in relation to their spatial and chronological resolution and the risk of chronological contamination (tab. 4-1-04).

The main portion of this chapter is devoted to the description of the trenches (Areas I–XVIII: figs 2-2-05; 3-5-01) and their layer sequence. The profiles of the tell shown as photogrammetric images and as colour drawings with the interpretation of the features and their association with layers are spectacularly rich in details and highly useful (e.g. figs 4-2-02a–b; 4-2-07a–b). The simplified Harris matrix of Areas I–II provides a good overview of the five main building stages and of the features in the tell’s central area (fig. 4-2-08). One of the most remarkable finds from Uivar is the fragment of a clay mask (fig. 3-5-03) that was recovered from the foundation trench of a house in Area I, the tell’s central part (p. 160). While the archaeological and cultural significance of the mask has been repeatedly addressed (e.g. SCHIER 2010), the many issues raised by this unique find will undoubtedly be revisited in future archaeological studies.

Two burials of the Tiszapolgár culture (F3443: fig. 4-3-12; and F3476: figs 4-3-13–14) were uncovered beside the remains of a Neolithic house in Area XI in the tell’s western part (F3208: fig. 4-3-29). A child’s inhumation burial, also from the Copper Age, was found near the tell’s eastern edge (Area V: fig. 4-9-02), and a crouched burial from the same period came to light to its south-west, beyond the area of the tell (Area XIII: Feature F4174: figs 4-5-09a–b). These burials would suggest that there was no more than a scatter of Early Copper Age burials on the Uivar site after the Late Neolithic and that we cannot assume a larger formal cemetery.

In addition to investigating the occupation patterns on the tell of the Uivar settlement, Areas XIV and XV were excavated between 2005 and 2007 in order to gain information on the single-layer settlement (pp. 373–411, W. Schier). The magnetometry plan of the area had already indicated the presence of two burned buildings in close proximity to each other (fig. 4-6-35). One interesting insight drawn from the archaeological record is that there were at least two house-generations in the area lying some 60 m from the tell, a part of the single-layer settlement that was prone to periodic flooding (pp. 410–411).

The investigation of the enclosure system of multiple ditches was one of the priorities of the research project (fig. 2-2-5), alongside the examination of the sequence of the individual ditches, the dynamics of their infilling and their relation to the tell (pp. 327–362). The complexity of the stratigraphic relations between the ditches uncovered in Area IV at the edge of the tell and the backfill sequences of the ditches are illustrated with a generalised Harris matrix (fig. 4-4-53). Both ditches and a causeway were identified in this area (fig. 4-4-04). The additional ditches indicated by the geophysical survey around the tell and their morphological traits were archaeologically investigated in Areas VI–X, XII–XIII and XVI–XVIII (pp. 363–373; 412–438). The sophisticated construction technique of this enclosure system was revealed by the section of the ditches and the presence of palisade trenches (e.g. the profile of D10: fig. 4-7-03). In addition to the natural infilling of the ditches, traces of regularly recurring intentional depositions were also noted. One of these was an assemblage of Tiszapolgár vessels whose fragments were found over a small area with a vertical depth of roughly 1 m, raising the question of whether the vessel fragments represent a single or several acts of deposition (pp. 416–418). It is nevertheless striking that while the Neolithic ditch was renewed during the Tiszapolgár period and was the setting of acts of deposition, only scattered settlement features were noted in the tell’s central area (Building Stage 1c: fig. 4-2-08), and that the Tiszapolgár-type pottery amounted to 16.7% in the negative features of Building Stages 1c–d, a relatively high proportion (p. 485).

Chapter 5 (“Stratigraphical analysis of find distribution [Area I]” by Ch. Menzler and W. Schier, pp. 443–489) seeks to offer a representative picture of the distribution of various find types in rela-

tion to the building stages and other variables in Area I – where the most complete stratigraphic sequence was recorded – using a variety of statistical methods. The results of these statistical analyses are also presented in a series of informative diagrams. The preliminary assessment of the diagnostic pottery finds is particularly instructive, pre-figuring the main points of the planned volume on the ceramic finds by B. Dammers to be published later (Vol. III of the site report series). The section discussing the stratigraphic distribution of cultural groups is based on the typological analysis of the ceramic inventory, which used pre-defined, occasionally uncertain categories (pp. 481–489) that raise a series of further questions. For example, the joint presence of a typical Vinča and Szakálhát amphora in one of the buildings “raises the question of the identity / identities of the occupants and the symbolic meaning of ceramic styles” (pp. 481–482). Moreover, some of the categories used by B. Dammers, such as “Tiszaoid-Vinča” and “Banatian Szakálhát”, seem somewhat vague (fig. 5-6-08).

The results of the meticulous statistical analysis of Area I are self-contained in the sense that they only provide information about the central part of the tell settlement. There are no similar datasets for the single-layer settlement around the tell (e. g. from Areas XIV–XV) that would enable comparisons between the two settlement parts.

Many readers will probably agree with me that chapter 6 (“Scientific dating and chronological modelling” by A. Bayliss, B. Gaydarska, A. Whittle, F. Drașovean and W. Schier, pp. 491–548) is one of the volume’s most weighty parts. As already mentioned above, the Uivar research programme also participated in the ToTL dating project, with the latter designed to address a series of issues specific to the site. The research team led by A. Bayliss used the Bayesian chronological modelling for the evaluation of the 182 dates obtained from the radiocarbon measurements, a procedure that has already been successfully employed in the case of other prehistoric tell sites such as Vinča-Belo Brdo and Çatalhöyük. In addition to the overall goals of the ToTL project, some objectives were focused on the Uivar site; a highly informative preliminary overview of the formal chronological model of the site was published by F. Drașovean and his research team (DRAȘOVEAN et al. 2017). The overall structure of the chronological model for Uivar according to phases and areas is shown in fig. 6-9. Navigating the section describing the process of chronological modelling from Areas I–II and III to Area XVIII is not an easy task, despite the many excellent figures and tables accompanying this section. Aiding a better understanding of the mass of data crammed into this chapter is the section offering a narrative of the Neolithic biography of the Uivar site (pp. 529–535) and the comparison of the sequences for house and ditch constructions (fig. 6-27). The successive building stages and the construction of the enclosure ditches spanned the period from 5250–5140 cal BC (95 % probability) to 4670–4560 cal BC (95 % probability).

The local space-time model for the occupation of the Uivar settlement is set into the broader context of the Banat region based on the 109 radiocarbon dates available from other Middle and Late Neolithic sites (pp. 536–548, cf. tab. 6-10). As a Hungarian prehistorian, it is particularly pleasing to see the probability distribution of the dates from Hódmezővásárhely-Gorzsa (fig. 6-32) alongside the chronological models for Potporanj, Foeni, Parța I and Sânandrei (figs 6-28–31). Fig. 6-33 shows the basic chronological parameters of the Middle and Late Neolithic of the Banat region, while fig. 6-34 offers a schematic overview of the region’s fourteen radiocarbon-dated sites.

The volume is rounded off by chapter 7 (“Synthesis” by F. Drașovean and W. Schier, pp. 549–565), a comprehensive overview of the tell’s biography and its cultural and historical context, which crowns the enormous work put into the previous chapters. A synoptic chart of modelled radiocarbon dates (fig. 7-1) is an excellent visual aid for a better comprehension of the relative and absolute chronology of the tell’s central area and its edge, as well as of the single-layer settlement and of the

dynamics between them. It also shows the sequence of the Neolithic cultures both at Uivar and in the Banat region. The bare bones of this framework are fleshed out in superb detail in the two ensuing sections (“Biography of a tell” and “Cultural dynamics as reflected by the stratigraphy of the site”). DRAŠOVEAN et al. 2017 present their calculations of the total volume of the tell and their estimates of the amount of soil removed during the construction of the enclosure system, the latter reflecting the mobilisation of collective labour on an extraordinary scale (tab. 7-1). The chapter’s final part is taken up by a discussion of the site’s environmental setting, which has been kept rather brief, no doubt owing to the detailed presentation of the landscape in the Introduction.

Altogether, volume I of the planned monograph series on the investigation of the Uivar “Gomilă” settlement, the culmination of a decade-long tireless and thorough fieldwork conducted by an international research team on the site, provides a report on the first results in a well-written book, rich in details and meeting the highest academic standards. We are offered an insight into the changing dynamics of the settlement and its enclosure system, alongside a concise overview of the cultural development of the Banat region. The volume will be central to our understanding of the Neolithic, not solely for this region, since it represents a major milestone in the study of the pre-history of South-East Europe, too, and we are definitely looking forward to the publication of the other planned volumes.

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