



## Book Reviews

### **BRIGHT BLADES AND RED METAL: ESSAYS ON NORTH ITALIAN PREHISTORIC METALWORK, BY MARK PEARCE**

London: Accordia Research Institute, University of London. 2007. 144pp, 34 b&w figs and photos. pb ISBN 978 1 873415 33 7 (£36)

Mark Pearce sets out to create a 'holistic approach to the study of metal' within his nominated research area of northern Italy from Liguria in the west to Veneto in the east (although there is no overview map). In this objective he is successful to the extent of covering a range of important issues at most key stages in the life-cycle of metal and metalwork, from ore extraction to final object deposition.

After an introductory chapter, six further ones each deal in turn with a separate issue concerning the material: exploring typology (2), understanding metallurgical origins (3), raw material procurement (4), metal production (5), alloy choices, forms for metal distribution and associated ponderal systems (6) and consumption (7). These are predictable subject areas within the field of study today, in part serving to illustrate the *chaîne opératoire*. Nonetheless, Pearce develops some interesting case studies at times drawing on sites whose importance goes far beyond the region – Monte Loreto, a recently excavated copper source (fieldwork by the author himself); Frattesina, a settlement littered with craft production debris; or lake-side Peschiera with its unparalleled haul of metal objects.

For the reviewer, however, several passages seemed *passé*. The extended discussion about explicit and implicit understandings based on typological classification and nomenclature covered well trodden ground (ch 2), even if it may be important for the individual's position to be stated. Curiously, this discussion omits to consider the implications of perceptible morphological separation between 'types' – how does this translate into contemporary perceptions over a passage of several generations? Again, it is hardly new ground to argue for a high degree of invisibility in the circulation of metal, especially perhaps in the early stages of currency within a region (ch 3).

The problematical phasing of the earliest metallurgy, or at least the earliest metalwork, is still seriously hampered by few relevant finds and virtually no useful contexts. Compositional analyses are recruited to assist typology in the evaluation of individual finds, but we are left with a very patchy picture despite some key dated contexts, such as the smelting of fahlore in the early 4<sup>th</sup> millennium cal BC in the Austrian Tyrol and, later in that millennium, copper-axe-carrying Ötzi.

Pearce seeks to elevate the importance of the humble copper awl (ch 3), several of which occur on settlement sites; he sees them as specialist tools involved in high quality pressure flint-working of the time, a not implausible scenario. However, their typical contexts somewhat undermine the case for a shift from the 'domestic sphere' to 'specialist artefact production' and the case study is further weakened by a failure to consider or dismiss alternative fine-flint-flaking tools, notably of antler or bone.

On a more positive note, *Bright Blades* gives us a comprehensive summary of copper deposits across northern Italy, where they occur in every province (ch 4) emphasising the metallurgical potential of this region which is often overlooked in favour of the more northerly Alpine sources. In chapter 5 the sequence is taken forward to smelting, ingot and object production. Important evidence is reviewed here, for example that challenging the conventional wisdom of Eibner that chalcopyrite ores required two-stage processing to bring about a smelt, or the indications of smelting at some distance from the sources. We are also reminded of his own earlier model (with De Guio) on the wining and transportation of ores as part of transhumance cycles and the critical role played by hard cheese in this economy. This exciting model is sadly let down by the lack of any interpretative overlay on the accompanying map (fig. 5.1).

Chapter 6 continues the theme of 'production' but Pearce is concerned neither with the technologies of casting nor the significance of type choices *per se*. After an initial look at choice-making in the alloys used, his main focus is instead on the recognition of ingot forms, in other words the forms accepted as legitimate for metal distribution. His approach is novel, tying this in with the growing (Europe-wide) evidence for weight systems emerging during the Bronze Age. Weights themselves are recognised from the Middle Bronze Age onwards in northern Italy, but while their identification may no longer be controversial, Pearce's plots based on the weights of objects in selected hoards are unconvincing as supplementary evidence for a controlled weight system. The debate here (as elsewhere) must be about the degree to which obvious and approximate standardisation of form (and therefore metal quantity) necessarily implies any real desire to quantify in terms of measured weights. The fact that sites like Frattesina are the foci of actual finds of weights may suggest that there was only an interest in weighing, or a 'need' to weigh, in rather specialised economic environments. Indeed, it is in the final chapter that we learn of the strategic interface role of such sites within broader 'trade' systems involving, *inter alia*, the east Mediterranean.

Frattesina, Borgo San Zeno and other sites (notably of the Terremare culture) are tied in to an interpretation of complex shifting economic power across the Middle-Recent-Final Bronze Age span, one that also involves a shift in the predominant copper supply – from the northerly Alps to southerly Tuscany. This fascinating eclipse is seen to be related to the fact that cassiterite was available in Tuscany and thus, though more distant, that region could supply copper and tin together. Some of the pick ingots from the southern sphere (unlike their more northerly counterparts) demonstrate the addition of tin at an early stage in the circulation cycle.

The other main component of this last chapter is the apparently novel suggestion that the vast haul of bronzes from Pescheira was the result of some kind of ritual wetland deposition. This is a late adoption of a more widely accepted idea across Europe, but deserves more thorough evaluation in the Italian context; for example, Pearce notes in passing that other regions have significant quantities (or proportions) of metalwork from wet places.

At the end of the text discussion stops abruptly; there is no concluding passage drawing together the varied and significant range of evidence and ideas presented throughout this book. Perhaps this should have been anticipated from the sub-title, 'essays', but it does mean it falls short on the author's holistic objective. Hopefully there is more to come, for Pearce has shown the importance and interpretative potential of a region which is generally overlooked in favour of the accepted economic powerhouses of Bronze Age Europe.

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