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Book Reviews

THE EARLY NEOLITHIC ON THE GREAT HUNGARIAN PLAIN. INVESTIGATIONS OF THE KÖRÖS CULTURE SITE OF ECSEGFALVA 23, COUNTY BÉKÉS EDITED BY ALASDAIR WHITTLE

Varia Archaeologica XXI, Budapest: Institute of Archaeology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. 2007. 809 pages, 257 b&w figures, 29 colour figures, 70 b&w plates, 71 colour plates, 143 tables. 2 vols. 2007. ISBN 978-963-7391-90-3, HU-ISSN 0237-9090 hardback

Alasdair Whittle's publication of these two volumes on the Ecsegfalva 23 Project marks a magnificent achievement for European Neolithic archaeology. This is the first excavation report from the whole of the Early Neolithic of South East and Central Europe that has done full and complete justice to the term 'interdisciplinarity'. The editor has built a team of specialists from some disciplines well known to Early Neolithic archaeologists (eg, pottery studies, archaeo-zoology, archaeo-botany) but added many more contributing for the first time to our understanding of the Körös world - pollen analysis, soil micromorphology, chemical analyses of soils, daub analysis, ancient DNA analysis of animal bones, dental microwear and growth-increment studies of teeth, lipids and phytoliths. Anyone producing a modern excavation report will know the difficulties of integrating specialist knowledge into the bigger picture and of persuading the specialists to write in a way that facilitates mutual understanding – and Whittle has succeeded spectacularly in this respect. With one exception (Crowther's chemical analysis of soils, Chapter 12, lacks conclusions and a discussion), all of the specialists have made a valuable contribution to one or more of the four key questions that Whittle has specified in Ch. 1: what emerged when locals and incoming groups mixed in this area?; how did the Ecsegfalva 23 site fit into the picture of regional diversification found prior to 5500 BC?; how did the environment of the site affect dwelling practices?; and what was daily life like in the Early Neolithic at Ecsegfalva 23? This is the all the more remarkable since the site was rather small (50 x 50 m) and the area excavated much smaller. This is the definitive example of squeezing the maximum information out of a small excavation, with exemplary recovery standards, of a few pits and a cultural layer with no obvious features – not even hearths. It is the low-budget British answer to Ian Hodder's Catalhöyük project, supported by spectacular international fund-raising!

In the space of a book review, it is impossible to do justice to the quality and diversity of information presented here (for a summary of the main findings, see pp. 9 – 10), so I shall be selective in discussing eight areas of strikingly new ideas and conclusions about the Early Neolithic.

First, the theoretical framework of the project – 'living well together' (Whittle, Ch. 32) – takes Bourdieu-type agency theory and develops it by seeking to specify the kinds of human interactions that hold a small group together. Social existence is based on conviviality and performance – on choreographed interactions both on site and away from home, for those involved in extensive exchange networks. Whittle is less interested in sedentism (a 'clumsy' term) and mobility, more in intimacy, informality, peacefulness, generosity and the steady flow of life. This approach brings the reader as close to Körös individuals as one can go, even though the sceptic may detect the author's Romantic search for a long-lost sense of community – an idyllic homeland far from the harsh realities of Tiger Bay, downtown Budapest or even the tragic violence of the Linearbandkeramik massacre at Talheim.

The second achievement is the series of AMS dates which make Ecsegfalva 23 the best dated Early Neolithic site in Central Europe (Bronk Ramsay *et al*. Ch. 10). After a short occupation in the early part of the 58th century BC, the main occupation deposits of two cycles of house building, use and abandonment are dated to the 58th and 57th centuries BC – most likely an occupation of 70 – 80 years rather than 150 years, or three generations of inhabitants. This precision is an obvious challenge to other excavators of Körös sites to collect and date equally large numbers of samples from well-defined contexts.

The third advance concerned the palaeo-environmental reconstruction (Chapters 3 – 8). The site was located next to the Kiri-tó – at that time an alkaline, shallow, organic-rich lake full of late spring - early summer fish and molluscs. Kathy Willis (Ch. 6) was thus able to analyse the pollen from a lake only 100m from an Early Neolithic site – for the first time in Körös studies. The sedimentation rate at the time of the occupation was 1 cm per century or one sample for the entire 70-80-year occupation. This sample showed the continuation of a park woodland dominated by oak, increased hazel values, a fall in non-arboreal pollen and a microcharcoal peak. The forest expanded after the abandonment of the site, until major deforestation at the start of the Copper Age. Interestingly, Mark Gillings' GIS reconstruction (Ch. 3) showed that the inhabitants were 'worlds apart' from other Körös folk because of the way the vegetation closed down visual links across the taskscape.

The application of soil micromorphology to the excavated deposits (Macphail, Ch. 11) showed that the site was never flooded but rather built up in a continuous set of discrete deposits, with dwellings for humans rather than animals,

anthropogenic deposits at various depths in different parts of the site and weathering episodes between dumping episodes in the pit fills – for the most part ashed midden waste and the remains of burnt daub.

The analysis of daub remains (Carneiro & Mateicuicová, Ch. 13), excellent illustrated in colour, shows how much information can be squeezed from this initially unappealing material. The finding of reed impressions on over half of the fragments led to the reconstruction of Ecsegfalva houses (Fig. 13.41–42) , with split timbers, stakes and posts and bundles of reeds used for walls, rooves and furnishings. At the end of their lives, the houses were burnt, some to 700^{o} C, a few to over $1{,}000^{o}$ C, through the question of accidental vs. deliberate burning was not answered.

The remains of food and drink led to excellent analyses in 11 chapters (Chs. 14 – 24), which also permitted a synthesis of seasonality data, with markers in each season suggesting permanent occupation by at least some of the inhabitants for many years, if not all. László Bartosiewicz' chapter on animal bones synthesises all of the previous Körös faunal assemblages, showing that the high levels of wild animals found on some sites derived from small samples, whilst there was a high percentage of domestic animals, mostly caprines, in all of the large samples (> 10,000 NISP) – including Ecsegfalva 23. Lipid remains from the pottery (Craig *et al*., Ch. 18) showed ruminant fats, with milk fats indicating early dairying, perhaps from penned sheep. The same author's (Ch. 20) analysis of fish bones showed a preference for small fish, mostly *Cyprinidae*, caught after the spring floods. *Unio* shells were collected not only from the local lake but also from the river Berettyó, some 2 km away (Gulyás *et al*., Ch. 21). The determination of opportunistic fowling of small numbers of many avian species (Gál, Ch. 19) showed the benefits of extensive sampling for flotation. The same was true for the archaeo-botanical investigation (Bogaard *et al*., Ch. 23), which indicated low densities of plant remains, with no storage detected and a high probability of intensive garden cultivation of primarily glume wheats and barley. This analysis confirmed the place of Körös horticulture as midway between the Starčevo / Karanovo I-II groups and the Linearbandkeramik in terms of the breadth of the crop spectrum, which decreased with the spread of farming to the North and West.

The Ecsegfalva 23 assemblage of bone tools was the first Körös group to be analysed by Alice Choyke (Ch. 29), better known for her research on Bronze Age bone tools. She documented a suite of six techniques for making the tools, leading to a continuum of three stages in use intensity: Class I - intensively used and carefully curated, probably associated with one user in their lifetime but passed on to the next generation (pins, spoons, hooks and rings); Class II – made, used and discarded rapidly; and Class I-II: in between (perforators and bevel-ended tools).

There is an outstanding analysis of the chipped stone assemblage (Mateiciucová, Ch. 31) of 465 pieces – large by Körös standards and consisting mostly of blades, bladelets, flakes and débitage and very few cores and pre-cores – an industry for making blade blanks. Two different blade-making traditions were defined – the 'Mediterranean' pressure-flaking technique (absent at Ecsegfalva) and a 'Danubian' punch-technique tradition commonly found at the site. Since other Starčevo traits are found, Mateiciucová concludes that there is mixed population using two lithic traditions. The raw materials at Ecsegfalva indicate widespread exchange links, dominated by Zemplén limnoquartzites and obsidian, but with occasional pieces of Szentgál radiolarite, Volhynian and Banatean flint and porcellanite. Since no Neolithic groups were known at the time in the Zemplén, Bakony or Volhynia, these exchange networks forged links between hunter-gatherers and farmers.

So what does this all add up to? Whittle makes the telling comment that the site is 'rather an odd location for migrating farmers to end up in' (p. 750). His answer is a fusion of local foragers with incoming farmers, the former presenced by 'Danubian' lithic techniques and local hunting, fowling, shell-collecting and fishing, with the latter supported by exotic caprines, specialist dairying skills and Southern links in the ceramics. Ecsegfalva 23 and its neighbours were a reduced version of the larger and more complex Körös sites to the South, such as Szarvas 1 and Endrőd 39. A maximum of four houses, or perhaps 25 people, makes Ecsegfalva 23 a small band-sized node in a landscape classically suited to hunter-gatherer-fishers. The palaeo- environment of the site must have made farming and sheep-raising difficult in comparison with foraging pursuits, with hunting of fierce herbivores and other skills mostly conducted off-site. Daily life at Ecsegfalva 23 was convivial and choreographed, with local making of beads, blades and bread and much processing of animal carcasses and cereals. Several explanations await future research: the huge quantities of fragmented Körös ceramics (Orosz, Ch. 27), the abandonment of the site and the emergence of the Alföld Linear Pottery (AVK) group.

What more could have been elucidated given larger excavated areas? A wider range of structures, including houses and hearths, would be valuable, together with the investigation of their contexts and the question of their deliberate 'killing' by fire. Otherwise, what is truly striking is the totality of information from a few small, well-placed and well-excavated areas. Alasdair Whittle should be warmly congratulated for these volumes, which were splendidly produced by colleagues in the Institute of Archaeology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, under severe RAE pressure in December 2007. There can be no doubt that the Ecsegfalva 23 site report will become a keystone in the archaeology of early European farming.

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