



Book reviews:

Surveying the Greek Chora. The Black Sea Region in a Comparative Perspective. Edited by Pia Guldager Bilde and Vladimir F. Stolba (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, Black Sea Studies 4, 2006)

by Giorgio Baruchello

Some years ago, Professor Mikael M. Karlsson lamented that “the necessary concern with giving an account of intentions” had caused historians “traditionally” to refuse “to consider as historical data anything other than written accounts, eschewing, for instance, the ruins, grave sites, bones and artefacts which so occupy archaeologists” (“Can History Be A Science?”, *Þekking — Engin Blekking. Til heiðurs Arnóri Hannibalssyni*, edited by Erlendur Jónsson, Guðmundur Heiðar Frímansson and Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson, Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfa, 2004, p.100).

This is certainly true of mainstream historical research as it has been conducted since its inception in modern Europe’s academic universe, although it may not be so as regards Marxist historiography since the late 1800s and most ancient and medieval historiography after the 1950s. Written sources may even still prevail today as the favourite foothold for any extensive historical survey of what happened in the past and of why it did happen, yet one can no longer dismiss the utmost relevance of material history and the host of auxiliary disciplines that can reveal, amongst other things, the demographic, economic and infrastructural features of past civilisations.

The volume edited by Pia Guldager Bilde and Vladimir F. Stolba results from a 2003 international conference held by the Danish National Research Foundation’s Centre for Black Sea Studies at the Sandbjerg Estate in Sønderborg and it constitutes a splendid example of just such relevance. Not only does the investigation of the rural landscapes of Greek settlements around the Black Sea region reveal the kind of material interactions existing between them and the countryside upon which they relied for their subsistence. Also, it sheds light on plausible avenues, trends and patterns of cultural and ethnic exchange between Greek and non-Greek or “barbarian” communities, as well as on their social and political arrangements, for the organisation and the management of the land followed closely the distribution of wealth, power and status amidst and within communities. Moreover, this sort of investigation complements standard historical and archaeological research, which has typically prioritised urban settlements over “sanctuaries and shrines (of all types and sizes), graves, quarries, caves, kilns, cisterns, agricultural processing sites, mines,



dumps, lithic kidnapping debris, roads and paths, threshing floors, check dams, drainage ditches, bridges, sheepfolds” (Susan E. Alcock and Jane E. Rempel, 27-8).

Surveying the Greek Chora comprises thirteen papers presented at the aforementioned conference, entitled *Chora, Catchment and Communications. The Present state and future prospects of landscape archaeology in the Black Sea Region, 7th century BC – 4th century AD*. Additionally, it contains two further essays aimed at integrating the themes tackled by the former group of works. It is an instance of fruitful cooperative exchange between scientific communities that the Cold War had kept apart and who are now free to share and discuss findings as well as methodological concerns. It explores geographical areas that have long suffered from academic neglect, as land and survey archaeology of Greek antiquity has privileged the Mediterranean region, forgetting that “Sicily, South Italy, and the Black Sea were always one world” (Joseph C. Carter, 175). As a consequence, the book is written primarily and fundamentally by landscape and survey archaeologists for landscape and survey archaeologists.

However, the comprehensive variety of aspects discussed in the papers cannot but be of interest to historians dealing with Greek and Black-Sea antiquity, if not even to humanists whose research focuses on Graeco-Roman culture. The studies published in this volume will assist those who may wish to “touch” some real-life tokens of human activity from those times. Such an exercise can lead such humanists to acquire or enrich their ability to provide a clearer historical context to the written sources with which they regularly entertain themselves, oblivious to the meaning of “the bones of wild fauna such as deer, roe, fox, badger, marten, hamster, heron, wild duck, etc.” (Alexander V. Gavrillov, 257).

Field analyses of land management and ownership, for example, can help to counter widespread historical prejudice about “the unparalleled democracy of Athens” (John Bintliff, 13), the restriction of communistic systems to Sparta alone (see the “collective holdings” in the Herakleian Peninsula; Galina M. Nikolaenko, 163), or the preference for static notions of “archaeological cultures or politically-derived units like city-states and kingdoms” rather than a “flexible and dynamic alternative” like “community” (Owen Doonan, 48). Similarly, they can illustrate how the Greek process of colonisation of the Black Sea region may have been far less premeditated and systematic than often thought, and rather the result of land occupation presenting “spontaneous... agrarian character” (Sergej D. Kryzickij, 100). Also, they can further the understanding of the relationship between ethnically Greek communities and barbarian ones, which varied from open conflict (e.g. the “cataclysms” due to 3rd-century BC Scythians’ and Galatians’ invasions; Sergej B. Ochotnikov, 96) to successful fusion (e.g. the Čurubaškie Skalki settlement mentioned by Viktor N. Zin’ko, 294) often unrecognised by scholars adhering to “modern preconceptions of ‘nation states’ and racial purity” (Joseph C. Carter, 194).

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