



Jaroslav Řídký - Petr Květina - Petr Limburský - Markéta Končelová - Pavel Burgert - Radka Šumberová, Big Men or Chiefs? Rondel builders of Neolithic Europe. Oxbow Books, Oxford & Philadelphia 2019, 193 pages.

Upper-neolithic circular ditches, so-called rondels, have been the subject of a variety of interpretations since their discovery ranging from supposed practical (i.e. defensive) functions to purely social, religious uses. Somewhere between the two poles, there are calendar functions, relating to much researched, and yet still undemonstrated astronomical parameters. These questions are dealt with in the third chapter, "In Belief of Hypotheses", in which J. Řídký critically considers all options. The authors of the new book wanted to extend the issue to the question of whether these buildings were built by authorities of a local or supra-regional significance, based on analogies from the Pacific, the Big Men, who used their own abilities to stand out in egalitarian societies, or the so-called chiefs, whose position in ranked society was hereditary.

The inspiration for these questions probably came from the second author who is well versed in ethnoarchaeological and ethnosociological literature in English. It should be emphasized, however, that it is only in English, because it misses the French work, especially that of Godellier's "*Grands Hommes*" and their profound ethnoarchaeological application by the Péterquin family, which are of utmost importance. Many lessons could also be found in the very thorough studies of German researchers, once very active in New Guinea and Micronesia. However, an overview and effort to synthesize Anglophone works is also useful at an international level, which legitimizes the publication of these chapters in the language of their original sources. It has also given the book world-class appeal, enabling it to be published by a global publisher. The outline of the

different ethnological classifications of the types of societies and the spheres of competence of individual authorities in the second chapter (written by both main authors, J. Ř. and P. K.) is intended to prepare readers for the range of questions to be addressed. After the above-mentioned discussion covering the existing perspectives, the fourth chapter covers case studies, in which, besides the first author, M. Končelová, R. Šumberová and P. Burgert have also contributed. In addition to information on newer research from Bohemia (Prague-Ruzyně, Vchynice, Kolin 1-2), there are classic sites that seem to be interesting even in new contexts: Těšetice-Kyjovice, Svodín, Bučany, Kamegg, Friebritz, Künzing Unternberg, Bylany IV, Goseck a Vochov. In the sixth chapter, a summary of this new data regarding the design and construction of the rondel was contributed by J. Řídký, and was based upon his recent doctoral thesis (Řídký 2011). For an overview of the issue of radiocarbon dating, the authors contacted P. Limburský. In the next two chapters, the main authors, with some of the leading researchers, summarize the issue of the surrounding microregions and rondels (Chapter 8) and the overall settlement pattern of the stroked pottery culture in Bohemia (Chapter 9). The authors conclude that the settlements with rondels and those without do not differ in other respects (p. 171); this is true for the duration of settlement, the size of the settlement, the position in the landscape, the character of the pits, the presence of exotic imports and the absence of areas reserved for special features such as production or butchering. The presence of the imported raw materials of chipped industry is very unbalanced in the settlements of this culture, without any obvious reason for it: e.g. Chert from the 150 km distant Krumlov Forest, abundant in Kolin I, completely absent from Kolin II (Stolz *et al.* 2018).

A synthesis of the objectives will form the final chapter from both above-mentioned

authors. In its first part *Architecture of power?* These phenomena are summarized suggesting something about the power of elites and their interests by building a rondel to express something. However, there are not many clues, so the basic generalizable knowledge is repeated here: there is a pointed trench which runs along the inner side of the palisade, and around the outside there is raised bench from the extracted sediments (according to other indications Oliva 2010, 328), with a number of entrances, which generally point to an increased diameter of the rondel. The palisade was high enough that it couldn't be seen over, which itself creates a particular acoustic phenomenon and a creates a kind of isolated world. Radiocarbon dating did not confirm that rondels originated in Transdanubia (the German ones seem to be older), nor did it contribute to differentiation of different ground plans and construction stages; it can only be assumed that the outer ditches and palisades have gradually increased, all within a relatively narrow time frame of 4850 to 4700 years BCE.

The next part of the chapter, "ethnological inspiration" is interesting, but again, as in the recent extensive compendium (Květina *et al.* 2015), it is missing instructions for its use. The authors then do not even attempt ethnological applications.

The only attempt to determine whether the initiators of the rondel building were rather Big Men or Chiefs, was done by J. Řídký in Chapter Six (p. 100), in a discussion of my 2004 article. He suggests that the rondels are found in four different cultures, ranging from the confluence of the Sala and the Elbe to the confluence of the Drava and the Danube (Fig. 3.2) in an area of 800,000 square kilometers, still in the same varieties. This kind of situation could only have been undertaken by some kind of supra-regional authority, more the hereditary Chief than the Big Man in an egalitarian society. I think that no authority could wield enough power in prehistoric times to ensure such unification – and what purpose would

it serve? Rather, leaders would strive to unify the structures used for storage, related to redistribution, which Big Men and Chiefs would be engaged in; however, there are differences among the roundel regions, as are burial customs (p. 146). We regularly encounter a wide range of symbolic and even profane phenomena in pre-history, even from the Upper Palaeolithic. I mean, e.g. the Gravettian Venuses, which in several more or less steady types occur from the Atlantic to the Ural. We do not know what caused such unity, but it was certainly not the decision of any social elite. If we did not expect the authorities to unify designs in a wide area, we could justifiably expect them to keep the floor plan within one roundel at a single location. However, this is often not the case, and it is not by chance that these cases or sites are not mentioned in the book.

An especially telling example, uncovered in the year 2002 by Z. Čížmář (2008) in Mašovice, involves an enclosure wherein the two ends of the exterior ditch not only miss each other by 7 m, but do so in the area of the entrance, and had to be compensated by the construction of extensions later connected to the ditch. The groups that have been excavated the individual segments have been aware of, for long weeks, the fact that their respective sections would not join one another. There are many ditches with very different depths of ditch. The ends of these various deep segments usually occurred vertically (Trnka 1997, 42), which seems unnatural unless the diggers respected some kind of accepted boundary. A similar situation was uncovered during the excavation of enclosure III at Vedrovice, where the rounded base of suddenly drops from a depth of 130 cm to a depth of 320 cm with a pointed base, and after two and a half meters and a 1 m wide control block, again rises to 240 cm but then drops to 172 cm in the northwest (Humpolová 2001). Also, in the classic rondel at Těšetice-Kyjovice is unexcavated thresholds in the south western quadrant. (more examples with Oliva 2004 citations and documentation).

From this it is probable that each section of the ditch was dug by a different group, which then maintained it without consideration for the state of completion of the remaining sections, maintained by different groups. The elites of the day were not only unable to determine the appearance of the rondels, they were also not able to maintain the concept within a single construction! But if these works were not controlled at all, there would be no such excesses as in Mašovice, because the diggers themselves would not have proceeded so that they did not meet the opposite group and their work would have no meaning. Therefore, the authority was limited spatially or socially, and so was harder, and therefore forced the workers to what would have been clearly meaningless work, clearly in ostentatious opposition to the authority of their neighbour.

The claim that the building phases badly linked to the previous ground plan may represent a completely new concept, makes sense in the case of the Mašovice rondel, and in other cases it faces the fact that the ditch is slowly filling up, which could still be seen in the Bronze Age (p. 101). Obviously, using different comparisons, quite different sociological interpretations can occur. Perhaps more definite results would arise if instead of comparing with distant Pacific models, as presented by Anglo-American cultural anthropology, it would build more on domestic traditions.

The work is based on a thoroughly gathered newer literature, but the question is whether all the important data has been evenly extracted from it – cf. eg lack of references to discontinuous ditch sections and non-compliance with the underlying construction concept. Paradoxically, it is precisely these peculiarities that can be used to solve the question raised by the main title of the volume. Despite the somewhat uneven selection of important facts, this book will be the world's most widely used source of knowledge about this unique phenomenon of the Middle Danubian Neolithic.

References

- Čížmář, Z. 2008: Mašovice-"Pšeničné" (okr. Znojmo). In: Z. Čížmář ed., *Život a smrt v mladší době kamenné*, Brno: ÚAPP, 126–143.
- Humpolová, A. 2001: Rondeloid č. III lidu s moravskou malovanou keramikou ve Vedrovicích. In: *Podborský ed.: Pravěká sociokultovní architektura na Moravě*, 157–166. FF MU, Brno.
- Květina, P. – Řídký, J. – Končelová, M. – Burgert, P. – Šumberová, R. – Pavlů, I. – Brzobohatá, H. – Trojánková, O. – Vavrečka, P. – Unger, J. 2015: *Minulost, kterou nikdo nezapsal*. Pavel Mervart – ARÚ, Praha.
- Oliva, M. 2004: Flint mining, Rondels, Hillforts... Symbolic works or too much free time? *Archeologické rozhledy* 56, 2004, 499–531.
- Řídký, J. 2011: Rondely a struktura sídelních areálů v mladoneolitickém období. *DABP* 10, Praha–Brno.
- Stolz, D. – Malyková, D. – Kováčiková, L. – Přichystal, A. – Řídký, J. – Zitka, P. 2018: Sídlíště kultury s vypíchanou keramikou na silničním obchvatu v Kolině-Štítarech. *Archeologie ve středních Čechách* 22, 31–69.
- Trnka, G. 1997: *Zu Bauweise mittelneolithischer Kreisgrabenanlagen*, Sborník prací filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity M2, 41–48.

Martin Oliva