



# INTERDISCIPLINARIA ARCHAEOLOGICA

## NATURAL SCIENCES IN ARCHAEOLOGY

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### Book reviews

**Geschichte der Kulturlandschaft. Entstehungsursachen und Steuerungsfaktoren der Entwicklung der Kulturlandschaft, Lebensraum- und Artenvielfalt in Mitteleuropa**

History of Cultural Landscape. Causes of the Origin and Driving Forces of Landscape, Habitat and Species Diversity Changes in Central Europe  
Peter Poschlod  
Eugen Ulmer KG, Stuttgart (Hohenheim).  
2015. ISBN 978-3-8001-7983-1 (hardcover)



It is difficult to find a proper box for this book. Simply said, it is a book on the edge between vegetation ecology, landscape history and archaeology, written by a vegetation ecologist and botanist, who is experienced in other sciences. Peter Poschlod, equipped by a vast knowledge concerning landscape and its history, suggests an amazing set of stories that have occurred in the central European landscape since the beginning of agriculture – in 320 pages. The author defines Central Europe as a geographical region under the long, intensive, and invariably similar influence of Neolithic societies, followed by Bronze Age people, Romans and, finally,

by inhabitants of the medieval Holy Roman Empire. In each of these periods and socio-political units, the landscape developed under the anthropic pressure, leading to the formation of a specific cultural mode, which was substantially constrained by the setting of the geographical area.

The book, as the author admits in his introduction, has been in the process and its material collected over the last twenty years. Conceptually, the book's topic is not new within the German scientific literature; its predecessors can be seen in several older writings and in a rather popular volume by Hansjörg Küster (1996), who described the development of the Central European landscape from the Ice Age up to the present. In comparison with Küster's book, Poschlod's *Geschichte der Kulturlandschaft* is more scientific and, on the whole, broadly more useable in daily scientific practice, containing as it does 1 589 references, all connected via a system of numbers directly within the text of the book. Such a respectable amount of references, as well as the richness of argumentation, makes this book the fundamental base for any work in the postglacial history of nature in central Europe.

The first, slightly shorter, chapter deals with the origins of the Central European landscape, along with the constraining processes formed by vegetation, animals and humans. It explains the roots of the Central European cultural landscape in the Neolithic period. The timing of the landscape transformation at the Neolithic period is generally correct; however, some anthropic influences seem to be older, for example, concerning the anthropic impact in the Mesolithic period. Conceptually, this part represents rather a traditional view. A mixture of some local elements of nature with a certain amount of species from the Near East via the Balkans, and the western ways via the Rhône valley, with domesticated species dispersion and transmission, demonstrates the roots of the Central European landscape transformation in the Neolithic period. Stories of domesticated plants and animals

are narrated from the perspective of the natural sciences. To start the explanation with animals, however, does seem a little unusual, as they were domesticated long after plants. The author omits to mention a long period of wild plant species cultivation, and recent trends in plant domestication (*e.g.* Weiss *et al.* 2006), but it would demand another distinct chapter. This step appears to be unnecessary as the book is about Central Europe. The issue of the origins of agriculture, therefore, could be regarded as a traditional introduction deduced necessarily from generally-known facts. Thus recent views on the origins of agriculture are not mentioned (see, for example, the current conceptualisation by D. Fuller *et al.* 2014).

From the Eurasian perspective, the Neolithic transformation is crucial, because in this period Central Europe acts as a prolonged finger of the Near East. The concept of the south and south-eastern elements in the Central European landscape and the phenomenon of the diffusion and adaptation of agriculture is generally correct and enlightening. The author offers a rich outline of the processes of plant and animal migration, which formed the first large transformation of the landscape. During the Neolithic period, not only was there a new package of staple food plants used, but also a large amount of archaeophytes is recorded in archaeobotanical assemblages.

However, some details are surprising and maybe disputable. For example, water chestnut (*Trapa natans*) has been widely used as a staple food and cultivated in the Mesolithic period (Zvelebil 1994). Peter Poschlod discusses its use in the Neolithic period and later. In this context, the accessibility of water chestnut in 19<sup>th</sup> century trade is very surprising and interesting. It is just one of the reasons why environmental archaeologists should read this book carefully. Reason enough not only in the case of water chestnut, but in many other species that the author describes. Although we could discuss the incoming and diffusion of “the Neolithic” elements in our natural environment and the

role of indigenous humans in the Central European region, the first chapter of the book brings remarkable material about cultural landscape origins, discusses the steppe elements in the climatic optimum, the structure of the dominant wood species, and the role of wild herbivores. In this sense the first chapter is as good an introduction to the general topic as any.

The most valuable part of the book can be represented by its immense second chapter concerning the Central European landscape transformation after the Neolithic period. It is an excellent chapter: real landscape archaeology seen by a researcher who integrates his extensive knowledge of biology, ecology, archaeology and history. It is maybe for the first time in European literature that we read such a complex story from an environmental perspective. What is to be found in this book? A detailed description of (pre)historical field systems, the origins of meadows, the seasonality of agriculture, and many other subjects – all and everything related to the historical, social and, in particular, climatic development. The information

collected in Table 22, which summarizes the almost forgotten plant materials used in an ethnographic context, is really fascinating. Today we are familiar with the use of willow twigs for making baskets, and maybe with the applications of several other plants, but a look at the list of species will teach us that the reality of the past was substantially richer. In medieval higher society, luxury and imported species were used, shaping a new world of plants in medieval towns, monasteries and gardens. Again, for the youngest periods of Central Europe the author makes connections between climatic, social and biological development.

For all the above-mentioned reasons, Peter Pochlod's book makes an extraordinary source of information and becomes the new base for environmental history in Central Europe. The German language makes this book accessible to many readers in Central Europe, but an English translation would be a good editorial step – one which would make this work much more widely known. I fully recommend such an action.

Jaromír Beneš

## References

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