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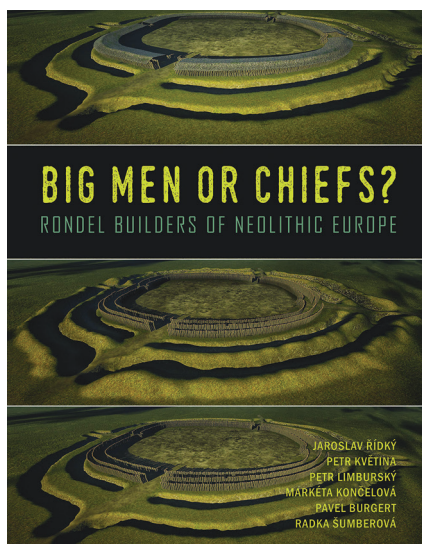


Book reviews

Big Men or Chiefs? Rondel Builders of Neolithic Europe

Jaroslav Řídký, Petr Květina, Petr Limburský, Markéta Končelová, Pavel Burgert, Radka Šumberová.

Oxbow Books, Oxford (2018), 208 pp., ISBN 9781789250268.



Since the 1960s, circular ditched enclosures, most commonly referred to as rondels, have engaged considerable research interest, both for their apparent monumental character and for the impact they could have on our knowledge of Neolithic society and its spiritual and political life.

Big Men or Chiefs? Rondel Builders of Neolithic Europe is a monograph of six authors from the Institute of Archaeology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague. The team of authors was led by Jaroslav Řídký and the book published by Oxbow books (Oxford and Philadelphia) in 2018. The main theme of the book is the sociopolitical strategies of Neolithic societies in the first half of the 5th millennium BC and the possibility of interpreting them based on archaeological sources – mainly through these circular ditched enclosures or rondels.

The book is divided into ten chapters, which gradually guide the reader through many aspects of the phenomenon of

rondels and the socio-political strategies in the Neolithic. Each subsequent chapter gradually expands the point of view and complements the information obtained by the reader in previous chapters.

Without more ado, let's look at the structure of the book in more detail.

The first chapter by Jaroslav Řídký defines both the temporal and spatial axis of interest of the book's authors. It presents the focal characteristics of the issue, as the authors perceive it, but also the way the authors chose to approach the issue and present it to the reader.

In the second chapter, Petr Květina and Jaroslav Řídký describe various typologies of archaic societies from the anthropological point of view; not least of which, the ways in which the individual types of archaic society manifest themselves in their material culture: especially in how this is reflected in the social and political organization of these archaic societies. This anthropological framework should serve as a basis for comparison with the Neolithic archaeological record, while, at the same time, attempt to reveal the social organization of these Neolithic societies.

With the third chapter Jaroslav Řídký acquaints the reader with current theories concerning the origin, spread and function of the rondels themselves.

Building on this, in the next chapter, Jaroslav Řídký introduces the reader to a basic database that contains more than 150 rondels with a wide range of described attributes, providing much data for the interpretation of rondels and related phenomena. The chapter also includes a summary of the field methodology used in the various cases and what kind of data this methodology is able to provide.

In the fifth chapter, Jaroslav Řídký, Markéta Končelová, Radka Šumberová and Pavel Burgert present several selected excavated rondels in central Europe – and illustrate how the defined indicators of social and power strategies manifest themselves in such settlements with rondels.

The next chapter by Jaroslav Řídký introduces the types of rondels that

appear in central Europe; the chapter also summarizes the theories about their original appearance. For example, the design of wooden structures within the space defined by ditches (from individual palisades to more complex roofed buildings with clay-stained walls) is discussed. Furthermore, the question of the presence of the bank lining the ditches is discussed. In the past there were many opinions among researchers about its existence, or its form and location. The authors give several examples of excavations from recent years, where the excavation methods used allowed this question to be solved in more detail: the results consistently point to the bank's existence in close proximity to the ditches, perhaps on their outer side. Thanks to the extensive database and its analysis, we can learn about the links between certain visual properties (number of entrances, *etc.*) and their size, or the relationship of individual types of rondels to particular regions. The chapter also introduces the methodology of the rondels' construction and the theory of their duration. The answer to the question of the rondels' purpose is also attempted, as well as to reveal the image of the society that built the rondels.

The following chapter, written by Petr Limburský, Jaroslav Řídký, Radka Šumberová and Markéta Končelová, focuses on the radiocarbon dating of rondels, its limits and problems, as well as the information it gives us about them. We learn that not only is this method not yet able to solve the question of the oldest rondels, but also, for example, that the ditches of the western group of rondels began to fill earlier than the rondels of the eastern group, a phenomenon that is still waiting for a convincing explanation.

With the eighth chapter, by Jaroslav Řídký, Pavel Burgert and Markéta Končelová, the reader will learn about the broader context of rondels in the particular regions where they occur. Discussed here are the definitions of micro-regions, the settlement network, the appearance of settlements, burials, and other facts, within which there may be traces that could reveal

the social and power organization of the Neolithic society in particular regions.

In the ninth chapter, Jaroslav Řídký, Markéta Končelová, Pavel Burgert and Radka Šumberová focus in detail on the region where the Stroke-ornamented ware culture occurs, and in particular on Bohemia – the place of work and the main area of interest of the book's authors.

Finally, in the last chapter (chap. 10), Jaroslav Řídký and Petr Květina summarize the previous parts of the monograph and, based on this, try to answer the question stated in the title of the book. They also describe the possibilities and limits of archaeological sources in revealing the shape of Neolithic society.

The authors of the book, based on the described characteristics, and after evaluating all possible explanations, believe that rondels were most likely to be used for religious or ritual purposes, *after all, faith and religion are most often the "driving force" of building monumental structures.*

We also see that the role of religion in archaic society is not autotelic, and that it has implications for the more profane aspects of society, such as economics, politics, and the general order.

So how does this reflect on Neolithic society and how does it relate to the answer to the question the authors themselves

asked in the title of the book? Were the rondel builders Big Men or Chiefs?

If the answer should be one of the options mentioned in the question, then the archaeological record would be quite contradictory. While monumental rondels could be taken as an argument for chiefdoms, other contemporary aspects of material culture are opposed to this, such as the absence of exceptional burials for these chiefs, the distribution of exotic items within the settlement network, and so on.

The authors have therefore decided to follow another way, an alternative that anthropology offers them. They advocate the idea that society was not stratified vertically but horizontally. The society could have been made up of exogamous clans controlled by a council of elders or clan gatherings. Clans were stratified among themselves, not on the basis of subsistence or politics, but within the religious field. The most powerful clans had the right to perform the rituals necessary to keep their world running.

Compared to the previous period, this society has manifested itself in many new phenomena that can be observed in their material culture: new forms of houses, changes of settlement patterns (grouping settlements to larger agglomerations), new patterns in the distribution of stone raw materials, and new complex styles of

ceramics decoration. The most significant phenomenon was the construction of rondels: which could reflect the unequal status of individual clans, and could also help to shape and define new social units that did not exist before.

In this review it has been possible to mention only a small part of the sub-themes and issues that the book deals with; this review is not meant to be a complete list or analysis of the problems discussed.

Overall, the book *Big Man or Chiefs? Rondel Builders of Neolithic Europe* has been written very clearly, acquainting the readers with the theoretical foundations on which the authors have built their book. Furthermore, the book discusses all aspects of the rondel phenomenon in a broad scope, with each following chapter bringing new additional data for use by the authors in their conclusions. Then these conclusions are confronted with their theoretical fundamentals and ultimately with the possibilities for their interpretation. The authors approach the interpretation of archaeological sources with the highest responsibility and they stick to the space delimited by the data. The reviewed book is thus a valuable submission to our discussion of the phenomenon of Neolithic rondels as well as the structure of Neolithic society as a whole.

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