

**Review of: Alram-Stern, E. & Dousougli-Zachos, A. (2015). Die deutschen Ausgrabungen 1941 auf der Visviki-Magoula/Velestino. Die neolithischen Befunde und Funde (Beiträge zur ur- und frühgeschichtlichen Archäologie des Mittelmeer-Kulturraumes 36). Bonn: Habelt. 578 pages, 282 plates (30 in colour), 2 folding plates. ISBN 978-3-7749-3876-2.**

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The excavations at Visviki Magoula have always been an oddity in the history of Greek archaeology. Its most famous find, the long “megaron” with its unusual plan, was strangely reminiscent more of the much later “House of Tiles” of Lerna than of its Neolithic siblings, renowned since Tsountas’ iconic publication (ΤΣΟΥΝΤΑΣ, 1908). Somehow, the Visviki megaron never looked entirely comfortable in the timeframe and context assigned by its excavators. Moreover, the circumstances of its excavation by Professor Hans Reinerth of Berlin University in 1941, few months only after the German invasion of Greece, and its first public presentation in 1942 in the official Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* stigmatised Visviki and established, if not an altogether negative air, definitely a certain uneasiness. Lack of proper publication made things worse, and the brief examination of the site by Theodor Charis in 1972 reporting no traces of the megaron added to the suspicion that something was not quite right with this archaeological eccentricity, investigated in conditions of high irregularity.

In fact, Visviki was a kind of a nationalist mission, a prime example of political manipulation in archaeology. From the start, it was conceived as a part of the general program of the *Archäologisches Institut des Deutschen Reiches* (AIDR) to conduct excavations in the occupied lands and promote its pan-germanic goals by establishing the “Nordic-Indogermanic” influence on the early cultures. The emphasis on the megaron type, which became the hallmark of Visviki, was a central part of that project. The project, however, capitalised on the importance already attributed to house form from the typological school of Oscar Montelius, and the arguments already put forward for the migration of Nordic people to the South by respected authorities such as Wilhelm Dörpfeld and Alexander Conze. The political aspect apart, the whole Visviki case is a perfect expression of the concepts and ideas current in Central European archaeology throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Changing

cultures, antagonistic migrations, and belligerent ethnic – occasionally racial – groups dominated the archaeological vision of that era, reflecting, not surprisingly, the social and political instability and turmoil of the time, which led to two world wars. In that uncertain world, archaeology was only of use as a political argument, especially for a totalitarian regime.

All these fascinating issues are the focus of the opening discussion in the first chapter of the impressive volume produced by Drs Eva Alram-Stern and Angelika Dousougli-Zachos and a team of specialists and published in the prestigious series “*Beiträge zur ur- und frühgeschichtlichen Archäologie des Mittelmeer-Kulturraumes*” directed by Prof Harald Hauptmann. Quite rightly, the volume starts with the detailed description of the context of the project. Eva Alram-Stern outlines the pioneering role that Kimon Grundmann played for the German involvement with the Neolithic of Thessaly, and Gunter Schöbel traces in a very informative overview the development of concepts and ideas dominating German scholarship from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the time the excavation took place. Of particular interest is his presentation of the structure and aims of archaeological research as part of the Nazi state. Schöbel also presents some interesting documents, and he traces the itinerary of finds and archival documents after the War. A final subchapter by Kostas Zachos offers an elegant ethnography of Velestino, supported by a set of rare photographs taken by the photographer of the German group, documenting life in the Vlach village of Velestino at the time. Overall, the chapter offers a comprehensive overview of the history of Thessalian archaeology up to the time of the Visviki excavations, in the wider intellectual, political and social context, with a distinct emphasis on the German input.

The second chapter discusses the stratigraphy of the site. It is unfortunate that the excavators followed here the practice applied earlier by W. Heurtley in his excavations in Greek Macedonia in the 1920s and dug through the archaeological deposits in 50 cm spits. The practice, of course, makes it impossible to reconstruct stratigraphy or to use finds, especially pottery, to define and date deposits and architectural remains, a crucial aspect in a final and extensive excavation report. This setback is compensated to some extent by the illustrations of stratigraphy and the excavation plans. They have been carefully reworked anew for this volume and together with the original photographs they form an adequately accurate body of evidence. The drawings of stratigraphies,

in particular, provided key information for the re-examination of the megaron, as we are going to see. A good indication of their accuracy is provided by the example of a ditch appearing in the stratigraphic plan of the North side of the tell (Taf. XX). The geophysical survey executed in 2013 verified its existence in that spot, together with other ditches in the periphery of the site. Visviki now can be added to the growing group of Neolithic sites in Thessaly and Greek Macedonia that exhibit ditches or systems of ditches. Unavoidably, there are also some minor inaccuracies, as in the section A-B (Falttaf. 1a), where the location of the pit does not agree with the location in the plan of the megaron (Taf. 43).

Despite the difficulties in reconstructing the actual excavation process, Eva Alram-Stern, based on a skilful combination of documented stratigraphies, plans and photographs, could sort out the phasing of the famous "megaron". Alram-Stern is certain that the way it was originally construed as a building was begging the question of the significance of the megaron. In reality, it was a mix up of walls belonging to two phases, an earlier one with mudbrick walls over stone sockles, and a later one with stone walls without preserved mudbrick superstructure. The earlier phase exhibits clusters of small rooms, which are replaced by bigger elongated ones in the next period. The date, however, of the early and later phases is only tentatively assigned to Arapi and Dimini phases, respectively.

Regardless of the dating, it seems that this building never existed in the form that went down in literature, probably not even as a single building. This deconstruction of the Visviki "megaron" as an integrally conceived plan, makes much sense and solves the mystery of its rather strange form. At the same time, it compels us to think that this architectural type was, in fact, an archaeological illusion, at least for the Neolithic. It is interesting that archaeologists had employed the same megaron argument for totally conflicting ulterior political motives; in Visviki it was used as evidence of at formative Nordic influence, in Dimini and Sesklo as a token of the indigenous development of Greek culture from the Neolithic house to the Doric temple, as argued by Tsountas (1908, 390-395). We know now that the findings of Visviki Magoula accord well with other cases, too. In Dimini, the re-examination by Chourmouziadis (1979) showed that the central megaron was, in reality, the cumulative result of additions of rooms belonging to different phases, never conceived as a single plan or type. Similar observations apply for MN House 7-8-9 at Sesklo, which

had also been characterised as an early megaron. The LN megaron at Sesklo remains the only one which still retains its integrity, at least pending a re-evaluation. In any case, it is always useful to re-affirm that cultural paradigms which give priority to form may not be valid. The caveat applies first and foremost to archaeologies that still resort to comparisons of decontextualised formal characteristics, especially in cases of arguing for cultural diffusion of various kinds. This may probably be the one most important conclusion of this book.

The analysis of pottery in Chapter 3 represents the most extended part of the volume, with 278 pages, almost half of the total. As already said, the way pottery was retrieved with no stratigraphic awareness, precludes any detailed stratigraphic or contextual analysis. Understandably also for an excavation carried out in the 1940s, the pottery must have been heavily selected, at least judging from the numbers of sherds documented. With this amount of evidence, it is more than obvious that it is impossible to tackle issues such as the function of rooms, or the variability of activities in space and time, let alone the function of the pottery itself. Therefore, the analysis is restricted to a detailed typological analysis, which follows the periodization and the categories developed by the previous iconic publications by Milojević (1960) and especially Hauptmann (1981). For the same reasons stated above, the dating of pottery is exclusively based on the typology of form and decoration.

The pottery is presented in chronological order, starting with the Early and the Middle Neolithic by Caroline Dürauer and then to the Late Neolithic and Chalcolithic (i.e. Final Neolithic) by Eva Alram-Stern and Angelika Dousouglis-Zachos. In every period there is a description of the various wares and shapes and finally of their stratigraphic order. A short subchapter by Alram-Stern presents some sherds belonging to the Early Bronze Age, connected typologically to Mikrotithiva and Petromagoula, including typical rolled rim bowls and "cheese pots". In the different parts of Chapter 3 there are cross tables of sherd frequencies relating colour of clay, clay quality and shape with ware. In-text drawings conveniently accompany the descriptions, and there is a systematic concordance with the informative 162 plates at the end, 30 of them in colour, of which seven are in watercolour from 1944-45. A comprehensive catalogue of all sherds studied closes this chapter. The analysis and presentation of pottery are meticulously executed, and this very substantial body of evidence with its illustrations will certainly be a particularly useful reference for com-

parison and characterization. It is, however, a pity that the restrictions imposed by the lack of stratigraphic awareness let a rare opportunity to verify the periodization scheme go amiss.

The chapter ends with a valuable systematic technological and provenance analysis of pottery by Dr Areti Pentedeka. The aim of the petrographic analysis of raw materials from the area around Velestino and of sherds is to identify the local production as opposed to imported ceramics and to reconstruct the technological stages of ceramic production at Visviki. Recipes were persistent from Early Neolithic to Chalcolithic period, indicating a remarkable continuity of tradition. Imported wares from different parts of Thessaly include painted brown on cream, matt painted and black burnished categories, while local pottery amounts to 76 % of the total. Catalogues of the pottery samples and full petrographic descriptions of the raw materials and 15 colour tables complete this thorough analysis, which leaves little indeed to be desired.

The small finds of the excavation are also treated systematically. They are classified in the traditional way according to material in small finds from stone (Maximilian Berger, Ernst Pernicka, Thorsten Schifer), clay (Eva Alram-Stern, Maximilian Bergner, Caroline Dürauer) and bone and antler (Alfred Galik). The problems stemming from the excavation methodology again limit spatial analysis of finds to the most basic level. Most of the lithics, for instance, come from the built area of the settlement, indicating a concentration of activities. Obsidian from Melos (Adamas and Demenegaki) dominates Visviki, comprising 81 % of the stone artefacts. Just eight clay figurines are reported, together with a few spindle whorls, clay pyramids, and a small assemblage of bone and antler. All finds are fully catalogued, but information on the location of finds is again not available. Equally, sparse is the information on zooarchaeological and archaeobotanical remains, which are included in the study for completeness sake. They are very few and too unsystematic to be of any use with today's sophisticated requirements. Notable, however, for the history of the discipline is the early report of archaeobotanical remains of 1944 by Franz Bertsch, included also in the volume.

Last but not least, mention should be made of the geophysical survey carried out on the site in 2013 by Apostolos Sarris in cooperation with the Ephorate of Antiquities of Magnesia, as part of the wider investigation of Neolithic settlements of Thessaly. The results for Visviki are presented in an appendix at the end of the volume. Apart from

verifying the existence of the cluster of rooms, the survey revealed a whole system of enclosures with walls and ditches, organising the periphery of the site. The presence of enclosures is a feature we are now beginning to understand for the Thessalian sites as well, after investigating it during the last twenty years in some settlements further North, in Greek Macedonia.

The Visviki-Magoula/Velestino volume is an achievement, presenting a lot of solid scholarship and effort, and the result is nothing less than impressive. Although dealing with an old, in many ways obsolete excavation, the systematic and comprehensive approach adopted makes the volume a weighty contribution to the Thessalian Neolithic. However, the authors did something even more important than that; with their scholarly work, they managed to save Visviki Magoula from oblivion and lift the discredit into which Visviki was brought by the Nazi propaganda and the fear that the evidence produced was not entirely trustworthy. They rediscovered Visviki and brought out all its potential for more future work on the site.

The present volume, placed in the series where major influential post-war German excavations were published, closes in the best possible way the parenthesis opened by the irregularity of an excavation project conducted during the war in an occupied country. From this respect, it is highly significant and gratifying that the co-author of the volume and partner of the study is a respected Greek scholar. With this volume, the biography of the site returns to a period of normality. We can only congratulate both authors and their team for the result and above all for their dedication and perseverance to see this important project through.

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