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Villages and cities in early Europe

Manuel Fernández-Götz*

DIRK KRAUSSE (ed.). *“Fürstensitze” und Zentralorte der frühen Kelten. Abschlusskolloquium des DFG-Schwerpunktprogramms 1171 in Stuttgart, 12.–15. Oktober 2009*. 845 pages in two volumes, numerous colour and b&w illustrations. 2010. Stuttgart: Theiss; 978-380622433-7 hardback €148.

SUSANNE SIEVERS & MARTIN SCHÖNFELDER (ed.). *Die Frage der Protourbanisation in der Eisenzeit/La question de la proto-urbanisation à l'âge du Fer. Actes des 34. internationalen Kolloquiums der AFEAF vom 13.–16. Mai 2010 in Aschaffenburg*. 386 pages, numerous colour and b&w illustrations. 2012. Bonn: Habelt; 978-377493785-7 hardback €119.

STEPHAN FICHTL. *Les premières villes de Gaule: le temps des oppida*. 133 pages, numerous colour and b&w illustrations. 2012. Lacapelle-Marival: Archéologie Nouvelle; 978-295339739-0 hardback €26.

JESÚS ÁLVAREZ-SANCHÍS, ALFREDO JIMENO MARTÍNEZ & GONZALO RUIZ ZAPATERO (ed.). *Aldeas y ciudades en el primer milenio a.C.: la Meseta Norte y los orígenes del urbanismo* (Complutum 22(2)). 316 pages, numerous colour and b&w illustrations. 2011. Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid; ISSN 1131-6993 paperback €21.



The question of the origins of ancient urbanism—of the emergence and development of the first cities—has attracted considerable attention both from scholars and the

general public, and remains a ‘hot topic’ in archaeological and ancient historical research (see Marcus & Sabloff 2008 for a recent overview). What were the preconditions that led to the fusion of previously scattered communities? Is it possible to recognise some common patterns that transcend time and space? Can we speak of an ‘urban revolution’, as V. Gordon Childe did in

his influential paper of 1950? How did mental structures, identities and the perception of space change as a result of so many people living together in a small space and with the evolution of the more impersonal relationships associated with urban ways of life? Studying cities from a long-term and cross-cultural perspective links the past with the present, allowing a better understanding of one of the most important developments in human history. Moreover, archaeological research on ancient cities can contribute to a better understanding of contemporary processes of urbanisation (Smith 2012).

In temperate Europe the origins of urbanism have long been identified with the emergence of the *oppida* of the second–first centuries BC, considered to be the ‘earliest cities north of the Alps’ (to adapt the title of Collis’ famous 1984 book; see also Guichard *et al.* 2000). Recent large-scale research projects, however, have begun to challenge this long-established view, to the point that it is now possible to assert that the term ‘urban’ can be applied to some of the so-called *Fürstensitze* of the Late Hallstatt and Early La Tène periods (cf. Fernández-Götz & Krausse 2013, which includes a context-dependent definition of ‘city’). Moreover, our image of the *oppidum* itself has been subject to considerable modification, so that the functions, characteristics and even the layout of these large Late La Tène centres all need to be rethought. The four books under review here synthesise new data and approaches, largely concentrating on specific case-studies (sites or regions) and empirical results, although they also contain a number of articles with a wider interpretative and theoretical focus (e.g. the remarkable papers by Collis, Salač, Vaginay and Ruiz Zapatero).

On the basis of new data emerging from research projects conducted during recent years on so-called ‘princely sites’ such as the Heuneburg, Glauberg, Ipf, Mont Lassois or Bourges, we have to rethink our traditional understanding of Early Iron

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Artist's impression of the Heuneburg at the height of its prosperity in the sixth century BC (© Landesamt für Denkmalpflege).

Age centralisation and urbanisation processes. The spectacular results serve to indicate that the political and demographic dimensions of Central European societies in the sixth and fifth centuries BC have to date been under, rather than over, estimated. To quote only two of the most spectacular examples, recent research has shown that the entire settlement of the Heuneburg (citadel, lower town and outer settlement) comprised *c.* 100ha during the mudbrick wall phase, with an estimated population of around 5000 inhabitants, and in the case of Bourges, the whole complex covered several hundred hectares in the fifth century BC. Monumental fortifications, profane, sacred and funerary architecture, artisanal quarters and Mediterranean imports all bear testimony to the manifold functions of the centres of power which developed between the end of the seventh and the fifth centuries BC in an area stretching from Bohemia to central France.

Most of these new results are summarised in the two-volume set edited by KRAUSSE: *“Fürstensitze” und Zentralorte der frühen Kelten*. With more than 800 pages, contributors from several European countries and a large number of high-quality, full-colour illustrations, this impressive work constitutes an essential resource for the study of the Early European Iron Age. The publication represents the proceedings of a conference held in Stuttgart in October 2009, which served as a final forum for the Priority Programme ‘Early Celtic Princely Seats’, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) with some €8m between 2004 and 2010. Some of the main results have already appeared in Krause

(2008), the outcome of a conference that took place in 2006. Moreover, the research carried out in some of the sub-projects of the Priority Programme has also been published in the form of separate monographs since the final conference was held (e.g. Steffen 2012; Nakoinz 2013), thus providing a magnificent corpus of new data, interpretations and approaches. Nonetheless, it has to be noted that several key aspects—including the characteristics and role of open agglomerations or the relationships between fortified centres and their rural environments—continue to be under-explored. Similarly, looking to the future, it seems of key importance to explore in greater depth the role played by religion in the process of centralisation and the construction of collective identities, an aspect scarcely touched on in the volumes reviewed here, but the significance of which can be clearly observed in examples such as Glauberg or Závist.

While the Krause volumes are primarily devoted to the centralisation processes that took place between the seventh and fifth centuries BC, *Die Frage der Protourbanisation in der Eisenzeit/La question de la proto-urbanisation à l'âge du Fer*, edited by SIEVERS & SCHÖNFELDER, includes contributions on both the Early and the Late Iron Age. As the title indicates, the work is the fruit of Franco-German collaboration, since it consists of the proceedings of a French conference (*Association française pour l'étude de l'âge du Fer, AFEAF*), but one which was held in the German city of Aschaffenburg in 2010. The AFEAF, probably the largest current forum for researchers of the Iron Age in Europe, has the healthy tradition of periodically meeting in cities outside France (e.g. Winchester, Girona and Verona), and this is the first time that its annual conference has been held in Germany, doubtless because of the close contacts between the two German editors and French researchers. It should be noted that this AFEAF meeting has been published in the form of two books: the one discussed here on urbanisation processes, and another with a much more specific regional scope (Schönfelder & Sievers 2012).

The volume on urbanisation processes includes contributions both in French and German. Some of the articles (Collis, Kurz, Euler & Krause, Baitinger & Hansen, and Verse) are slightly revised versions of papers previously published in German in Krause's *Fürstensitze* volumes, which is a useful way for German archaeologists to make their most recent results known to their French colleagues.

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While most of the contributions included in the Aschaffenburg book deal with specific sites (including the Heuneburg, Ipf, Glauberg, Gergovie and Manching) or regions (e.g. Lorraine, Berry and southern France), there are also general papers on Iron Age urbanisation. Of these, I would draw particular attention to the joint paper by Buchsenschutz & Ralston, in which the authors attribute to the aristocracy a fundamental role in the processes of centralisation that took place in the Iron Age (a top-down model), and also to the article by Salač that, by emphasising the importance of large open agglomerations and establishing a distinction between 'highland' and 'lowland' *oppida*, takes a fundamental step in the rethinking of Late Iron Age settlement patterns.

Les premières villes de Gaule: le temps des oppida—a work by STEPHAN FICHTL, one of the most renowned scholars in the field of Late Iron Age urbanisation—is devoted to *oppida*. His previous book, *La ville celtique* (2005), is the best up-to-date synthesis available on the phenomenon of the continental *oppida* located between France and Eastern Europe. This is the only authored (rather than edited) volume of the four books reviewed here, although it has been written with the support of Gilles Pierrevelcin. In parallel with Fichtl's book, the publisher, Archéologie Nouvelle, has also published *Les plus grands sites gaulois* (2012), a largely complementary work written by Pierrevelcin with Fichtl's support.

Les premières villes de Gaule is a book aimed mainly at the general public, although it also provides a useful introductory synthesis for professional archaeologists and students. Particularly worth noting is the large number of illustrations, some of them full-page and nearly all in colour. The book, structured around themes (e.g. history of research, fortifications, economic production), offers a good overall perspective of the *oppida* of Gaul and the immediate surroundings. One of the main advances in research in recent decades has been the discovery of various communal spaces used for political and cultic activities within *oppida* like Titelberg, Manching and Corent, a subject well acknowledged by Fichtl. Interesting—and not very common in a book written mainly for a French audience—is the inclusion of overviews on the hillforts and *oppida* of the northern Iberian Peninsula and the British Isles. A general introduction to the Celtiberian *oppida*, however, would probably have given a more accurate comparison than presenting the hillforts (*castros*) of

the Cantabrian region; the description of the Greek colony of Ampurias also seems a little out of place in relation to the rest of the book.

The central regions of the Iberian Peninsula are not normally included in international debates on Iron Age urbanisation, as can be seen from their absence from the other books reviewed here. This is partly due to issues of language, but also to the lack of general syntheses on the subject and the still scarce participation of Spanish archaeologists in conferences held in France and Germany. The final volume under review here—*Aldeas y ciudades en el primer milenio a.C.: la Meseta Norte y los orígenes del urbanismo*, edited by ÁLVAREZ-SANCHÍS, JIMENO MARTÍNEZ AND RUIZ ZAPATERO—offers a solution to at least the second problem by offering an up-to-date general overview of the northern Meseta. This geographical region stretches between the Mediterranean, Continental and Atlantic worlds, a veritable 'melting pot' of influences giving rise to very interesting processes of hybridisation.

This book—a monograph of the journal *Complutum* of the Department of Prehistory of the Complutense University of Madrid—includes contributions on both the small hillforts and the larger, and generally later, agglomerations of the Douro and Ebro valleys and their immediate surroundings. It is noticeable that Spanish researchers are far less reluctant to use the term 'cities' than their Central European colleagues, as the word's explicit use in titles of several contributions demonstrates: thus we have 'Vettonian cities' (Álvarez-Sanchís), 'Celtiberian cities' (Jimeno Martínez) and 'Celtiberian city-states' (Burillo), as well as 'Vaccean urbanism' (Sacristán de Lama). Be that as it may, the outstanding contribution is that by Ruiz Zapatero, who offers an up-to-date and well-informed synthesis of what he rightly calls the 'urban kaleidoscope' of the northern Meseta. As he points out, in central Spain the process of Iron Age urbanisation was not linear and homogeneous, but rather a sort of mosaic, with different rhythms and settlement forms.

Taking a broader look at all four volumes under review, one of the main conclusions that can be drawn is that there was no continual evolutionary development on a European scale from simpler to more complex forms of settlements and socio-political organisation during the Iron Age; instead we find multi-layered, changing and dynamic cycles of centralisation and decentralisation (see also Fernández-Götz *et al.* forthcoming). At the risk

of over-simplifying, it is possible to establish the following sequence in the area immediately north of the Alps: 1) a first wave of centralisation occurred at the so-called *Fürstensitze* or 'princely sites' of the sixth and fifth centuries BC; 2) a period of decentralisation, which largely coincided with the so-called 'Celtic migrations'; and 3) a new phase of centralisation that would lead to the development of the *oppida* of the second and first centuries BC. This sequence marks a contrast with the developments that can be observed in large areas of the Mediterranean world, where many major settlements show a continual, relatively gradual development from the Early Iron Age to Roman times, and sometimes even up to the present day (e.g. Rome, Athens and Marseille).

Coming back to the *oppida* of temperate Europe, these sites present a much wider geographical distribution—and in many cases also had a larger surface area—than the Late Hallstatt/Early La Tène *Fürstensitze*. The differences between the two forms of settlement, however, seem to be less marked than traditionally thought. What is more, there are a considerable number of *oppida* which reoccupied sites that had already been fortified at earlier stages of the Iron Age, as in the case of all the large hilltops of the Middle Rhine-Moselle region like Wallendorf or Otzenhausen and also in other places like Závist, Dünsberg and Bourges. This makes it necessary to reconsider or at least qualify the traditional explanations about the genesis of these sites, placing them into a *longue durée* perspective. Finally, it is as well to remember that, despite the development of large agglomerations which can sometimes be labelled as 'urban', the Iron Age remained a fundamentally rural world, where the immense majority of the population lived in farmsteads and small villages that were scattered around the countryside.

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