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### **Review of "Deathways at Lepenski Vir: Patterns in Mortuary Practice. Excavations of Dragoslav Srejovi", by Dušan Bori. Belgrade: Serbian Archaeological Society, 201**

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*Deathways at Lepenski Vir: Patterns in mortuary practice. Excavations of Dragoslav Srejović*, by Dušan Borić, 2016. Belgrade: Serbian Archaeological Society; ISBN 978-86-80094-03-08 hardback £65.00 & \$79.00; xiii + 565 pp., 208 figs., 14 tables

Clive Bonsall

The site of Lepenski Vir in Serbia is situated in that part of the Lower Danube valley known as the 'Iron Gates region', which is renowned for its exceptional record of Mesolithic and Early Neolithic settlement. The Iron Gates reach of the Danube falls naturally into two physiographic zones—the 130 km-long Iron Gates Gorge cut through the Carpathian Mountain range, and the 80 km-long 'downstream area' of more moderate relief where the river begins its journey across the Wallachian Plain (cf. Radovanović 1996). The Iron Gates I dam, built to generate hydroelectric power and to improve navigation through the Iron Gates, forms the *de facto* boundary between the two zones. Lepenski Vir was discovered during archaeological surveys in advance of dam construction. Excavations conducted by Dragoslav Srejović in 1965–70 over an area of c. 2500 sq. m uncovered an unprecedented array of archaeological features and finds relating to repeated use of the site over thousands of years, including the remains of around 70 buildings with trapezoidal bases and (often) furnished with lime-plaster floors and stone-bordered hearths, over 200 burials and exceptional numbers of stone and bone artworks and body ornaments.

While there have been previous studies that provide information on aspects of the mortuary record from Lepenski Vir, this book by Dušan Borić is by far the most comprehensive study to date. It seeks to bring together all the available archaeological and bioarchaeological data relating to the human remains from Lepenski Vir, including information from the site archive pertaining to the recovery of the human remains and their archaeological contexts, post-excavation osteological analyses, results of AMS dating and stable (C, N, S and Sr) isotope analysis of individual skeletons and aDNA analyses (so far only of neonate remains).

The book is in two languages (Serbian and English), with the text arranged in a simple two-column layout so that each page contains both languages, with all figure and table captions in both Serbian and English. There are 10 chapters in the book. Chapter 1 describes the landscape context of Lepenski Vir, summarizes the history of research at the site, reviews Srejović's chronological scheme and offers a new interpretation of the stratigraphy and chronology of the site. This new chronological framework, informed by a large series of single-entity AMS <sup>14</sup>C dates on animal and human bone, recognizes three main phases of Stone Age occupation whilst accommodating Srejović's original terminology: Proto-Lepenski Vir (Early–Middle Mesolithic, c. 9500–7300 cal. BC), Lepenski Vir I–II (Mesolithic–Neolithic Transition, c. 6150–5950 cal. BC) and Lepenski Vir III (Early/Middle Neolithic, 5950–5500 cal. BC). There is no evidence of a Late Mesolithic (7300–6200 cal. BC) occupation phase, while post-Neolithic activity at Lepenski Vir is confined to a small number of burials and other features dating to the Chalcolithic, Roman and Medieval periods.

Chapter 2 discusses the history of research on human remains (both osteological and isotopic) and the methodologies that were employed. This is followed by a section on principles and methods of archaeothanatology (a taphonomic approach to the study of burials that relies on field observations of burials *in situ*), which forms a key aspect of Borčić's investigation of funerary activity at the site. The chapter concludes with a review of general theories of the study of mortuary practices in archaeology.

Chapters 3 to 8 are the core of the book. They provide very detailed descriptions of the mortuary evidence for each main period of occupation recognized at Lepenski Vir, covering aspects such as biology, chronology, mortuary treatment, injuries and pathologies, and subsistence and mobility. Comparisons are made with contemporaneous burials from other sites in the Iron Gates region.

Chapter 9 provides a comparative analysis of changes in the burial record through time, looking at temporal patterns in biological characteristics, demography, subsistence, health, violence and trauma, activity markers and mortuary treatment, and placing all this within the wider geographical perspective of Europe and southwest Asia.

The final chapter (10) offers an intensely theoretical discussion of the social and symbolic dimensions of mortuary practices at Lepenski Vir, set in the context of comparative regional and cross-cultural (archaeological and ethnographic) perspectives, with the aim of reconstructing the social organization, beliefs and ritual practices of the Mesolithic and Neolithic people who buried their dead at Lepenski Vir. Emphasis is placed on the significance of the sculpted sandstone boulders that were found in association with some Lepenski Vir I–II burials, the emergence of 'residential burial' (the placement of burials on or under the floors of trapezoidal buildings) by the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition period and the possible links between burial orientation and origin myths—all of which are seen as evidence of a major shift in burial customs and beliefs in the course of the Mesolithic.

Two appendices supplement the text. Appendix A, written by Emanuela Cristiani, provides a description and analysis of microscopic observations of cutmarks and other traces of secondary manipulation found on cranial and postcranial remains from 24 burials. The methodology employed in this work is also documented, highlighting differences between this study and previous work by Wallduck (2013). Appendix B provides a catalogue of the surviving skeletal remains from Lepenski Vir. Each entry in the catalogue includes the field description of the burial, together with information on its location/context within the site, a basic identification-assessment of the sex and age at death of the individual and information on the absolute or (assumed) relative age of the burial. It should be noted that in the original field documentation only 134 burials were reported; the additional 'burials' in this catalogue (nos. 135–202) are occurrences of disarticulated human remains or partial skeletons that were not allocated burial numbers at the time of the excavations.

There are many positives in this study by Dušan Borić. It is first and foremost a very rich source of archaeological and other information pertaining to the burials found at Lepenski Vir, some of it not previously published or readily available in English language reports. There are many previously unpublished photographs and plans, and much of the archaeoethanatomical analysis and some of the AMS and stable isotope data are also new.

It is, however, important to emphasize that the recovery and recording procedures used at Lepenski Vir, and the treatment of human remains both on and off site, fell some way short of current standards, and that contradictions and discrepancies exist in the field documentation (Bonsall *et al.* 2008). This is acknowledged by Borić, but only in the final chapter, and then only briefly. It follows that the presentation of 'data' in this book (as in previous studies of burial evidence from Lepenski Vir) involves a good deal of interpretation, and therefore is subject to error. The same applies to chronology – only 34 (17 per cent) of the 202 burials identified from Lepenski Vir have direct AMS <sup>14</sup>C measurements; chronological placement of other burials has been based on a re-evaluation of original stratigraphic or other contextual observations or burial characteristics.

The author's persistent use of the term 'Danube Gorges' for the regional context of Lepenski Vir occasionally creates confusion, in that it is not always clear when he is referring to the Iron Gates Gorge or to the Iron Gates region as a whole (including the downstream area). The patterns and trends in mortuary practice reconstructed for Lepenski Vir (and the proximate sites of Padina and Vlasac on the Serbian bank of the Danube) it seems are quite often projected over the wider region. An example of this is the perceived predominance in the Late Mesolithic and Mesolithic–Neolithic Transition periods of extended inhumation burials oriented parallel with the Danube, usually with the head downstream. While this pattern may apply in the Iron Gates Gorge (although it is by no means exclusive even here), it is less evident in the downstream area.

The discussion in chapter 10 of the social and symbolic dimensions of mortuary practices at Lepenski Vir will not find favour with everyone. It is highly speculative and draws inspiration from a very selective suite of ethnographic studies – a case in point being the adoption of concepts of 'residential burial' from Joyce's (2011) study of burial practices in Prehispanic Honduras between 900 BC and AD 450.

These reservations apart, this is an excellent book and a work of serious scholarship. It will surely stand as a major contribution to knowledge of the archaeology of the Iron Gates region and of southeast European prehistory in general.

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