

1_2_Introduction_to_the_Project

The "Early urbanism in prehistoric Europe?: the case of the Trypillia mega-sites" project is an AHRC-funded study of Early Urbanism in prehistoric Europe. The fundamental approach to state formation was developed in the 1950s by Childe, who argued in a diffusionist manner for the priority of Near Eastern complexity over that of Europe. The current view remains that the earliest states in Europe - the Minoans and Myceneans - were secondary formations dating to after 2400BC. This view has consistently ignored the development of Trypillia 'mega-sites' in 4th-millennium Eastern Europe, the largest of which were bigger than the Early Bronze Age city of Uruk. In 'The limits of settlement growth', Fletcher (1995) identified the Trypillia mega-sites as the sole exception to his global model of constraints on agricultural settlement expansion. It is clear that the mega-sites are a neglected phenomenon of global significance and that a targeted investigation of one mega-site and its hinterland would greatly aid our understanding of settlement complexity.

The Trypillia mega-sites in the Uman region of Ukraine constitute the largest sites in 4th millennium Europe, with five sites ranging in size from 236ha (Nebelivka) to 340 ha (Harper 2012) at Talianky. At Maidanetske, 1,575 structures were documented in an area of 181 ha (Müller & Videiko 2016), while, at Talianky, nearly 1,400 structures were documented by geophysical prospection in an area of 232 ha (Korvin-Piotrovsky & Shatilo 2008; Korvin-Piotrovsky et al. 2016). These population estimates implied not only social complexity but also the possibility of independent urbanism in Eastern Europe different from the Childean model but coeval with developments in the Fertile Crescent.

The primary aim of the project was thus a re-evaluation of Trypillia social and settlement developments through the inter-disciplinary study of a single mega-site in its local, regional, and Eurasian settlement contexts. A second, theoretical aim of the project was the development of interpretative archaeologies dealing with state formation, since interpretative archaeologies since 1990 have largely ignored one of the 'Big Questions' of social evolution – urban origins. This 'Big Question' of social evolution has been dominated by 'top-down' hierarchical approaches rather than a 'bottom-up' approach building on local household nodes and networks (e.g., Videiko 2008). This project seeks to redress that imbalance by combining recent approaches to landscape, community and personal identities, scientific methodologies and social modelling (cf. Kienlin & Zimmermann 2012).

Investigations of mega-sites in Ukraine started more than 40 years ago (Dudkin & Videiko 2009; Videiko 2012: 2013). Since 1971, mega-sites have been studied using two methods. Remote sensing (aerial photographs and magnetometry) has given an impression of settlement plans, although without much detail (Shyshkin 1985). Excavation of almost 50 structures at sites such as Maidanetske and Taljanki (Shmaglij & Videiko 2002-3; Kruts et al. 2005; cf. Burdo et al., 2013) have provided detailed architectural plans and offered reconstructions of 1- and 2-storeyed houses full of ceramics, figurines and animal bones. More recently, modelling of salt provisioning (Chapman & Gaydarska 2003) and mega-site arable productivity (Gaydarska 2003) have broadened approaches to the mega-sites.

However, the excavation of houses on its own will never provide a reliable site sequence. The outdated picture of a 4-level, size-based site hierarchy in the Uman area (Ellis 1984) is based upon traditional methods of site discovery – unsystematic and biased towards main valleys and large sites.

This project has been the first multi-disciplinary investigation of mega-sites ever conducted. We sought to deliver field data and interpretation on a scale never attempted on mega-sites, whose very size makes them difficult to investigate. The eight Project aims are discussed in Section 1_1 ([ADS LINK TO SECTION 1_1](#)). From its trial season in 2009 through to its final fieldwork in 2017, the Project has thus been poised to make a series of important contributions to the field of Trypillia studies, Balkan Neolithic and Chalcolithic research, Eurasian complex societies debates and the study of global pathways towards urbanisation (Gaydarska 2016: 2017). An important element in the Project's ongoing research was the development from 2013 onwards of an Ukrainian - German project at two nearby mega-sites - Taljanki (20 km from Nebelivka) and Maidanetske (23 km from Nebelivka). Many of the preliminary results of this parallel project have been published in an EAA Monograph (Müller et al. 2016). It goes without saying that the research goals of the Ukrainian - German project and their insights into Trypillia mega-sites have proved to be a major stimulus to the changing research interests of this Project.