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"Origins of Agriculture in Western Central Asia. An Environmental-Archaeological Study", David R. Harris, Philadelphia 2010 : [recenzja]

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REVIEW: DAVID R. HARRIS, *ORIGINS OF AGRICULTURE IN WESTERN CENTRAL ASIA. AN ENVIRONMENTAL-ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY*, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY, PHILADELPHIA 2010, 319 PAGES, 86 ILLUSTRATIONS, 30 TABLES

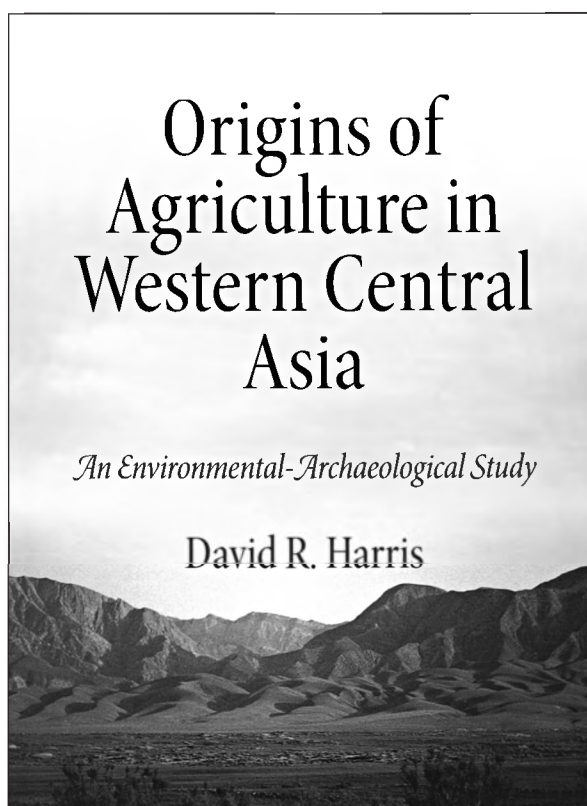
A book by David R. Harris, together with fourteen contributors, brings very important and valuable data concerning the Neolithic of western Central Asia. The work is mostly based on field observations and analysis of samples taken in southern Turkmenistan in the course of carrying out an international project between 1989 and 1998. During that period a group of British scientists, accompanied by Russian and Turkmen specialists, managed to collect an abundant material, later studied and analysed in English laboratories. As a result the discussion is dominated by problems of the Jeitunian Culture in southern Turkmenistan, and its connections with neighbouring sites, but results and conclusions are shown in a wide context. Furthermore, the book under discussion is excellently illustrated and edited.

After contents, lists of illustrations, tables, contributors, a preface with acknowledgements, and a short introduction, a reader approaches the main text, divided into five parts. Part One is devoted to the physical environment and ecology of western Central Asia. The first two chapters of this part give a detailed description of the present day environment, with its local peculiarities, and a general overview of environmental changes during the Pleistocene and Holocene. Two following chapters, based mostly on new materials collected in the field by the authors, present the local environments of the Jeitun site, and of a group of sites located in part of the Bolshoi Balkhan mountain chain.

Part Two is dedicated to general prehistoric archaeology of the region, and consists of two chapters: Chapter One, in which a history of archaeological research is presented, and Chapter Two, where the main Mesolithic and Neolithic sites, chronological sequences, and subsistence are discussed.

In Part Three particular crop plants and domestic animals identified as present in the Neolithic in the region are discussed, with special attention paid to their origins and wild progenitors. Each species of crop and domestic animal is profoundly examined.

The most extensive Part Four thoroughly documents the achievements of the British archaeological-environmental field investigations in Turkmenistan between 1989 and 1998. After showing detailed results of excavation and survey at the site of Jeitun, in the valleys of the Sumbar and Chandyr, and in the Bolshoi Balkhan



Mountains, come analytical chapters devoted to various aspects of the study. The Jeitun samples are presented first, starting with radiocarbon chronology (eleven on-site, and three off-site dates), followed by sections dealing with the analyses of yard deposits and building materials, buried soils and their sequences, phytoliths, plant macro-remains, wood charcoals, pollens, animal remains, lithic assemblages, and pottery. All these parts, although written by various authors, follow a similar arrangement: introducing the problem, presenting the methods used, showing the results, and ending with a discerning discussion, and clear conclusions. Such a pattern is very helpful not only in understanding the results, but also in evaluating how reliable they are, and what they add to a general picture of the Turkmenistan Neolithic.

One can only be disappointed that just ten pages are devoted to the presentation and analyses of archaeological portable artefacts – lithics and pottery, especially when a closer examination of this material could probably

throw better light on some of the problems discussed in the summarising Part Five, e.g., possible connections between the Jeitunians and their neighbours. This is probably the weakest aspect of the book.

In the following chapter analyses of excavated materials from the Bolshoi Balkhan are presented, with wood charcoal, animal remains, stone tools, and pottery from the Dam Dam Cheshme rockshelter sites discussed. At the end, besides black and white figures in the text, Part Four includes thirty-nine colour figures of perfect quality.

Part Five, containing the synthesis and conclusions, is divided into two chapters describing the Neolithic settlement and subsistence, and summing up what is known, and what is not known about the beginnings of agriculture in western Central Asia. The Jeitun site itself, and the Jeitunian Culture as a whole are broadly discussed in seven sections, considering, among other issues, the possibility of mutual connections of this entity with the Kelteminarian in the north, and Iranian and Afghan Neolithic sites to the west and east. In the second chapter, the state of knowledge of the beginnings of agriculture in Central Asia is summed up in four sections, touching crucial questions: what were the centres of origins of plants and animals domesticated in the Turanian Lowland, what was the overall Neolithic settlement pattern and economy, what was the impact of environmental changes, and what cultural processes accompanied the transition to agriculture? The author goes into a very deep and detailed

discussion, critically citing views and theories of other researchers. In many cases he does not formulate definitive opinions, but only suggests what he finds more probable. Such a cautious style makes a reader sure that the text is thought through and very well balanced. In the final conclusion, the author draws a picture of the origins and development of the agricultural Neolithic along the Kopetdag piedmont, discussing also its relations with northern and eastern neighbours. Very important is that he clearly differentiates facts, probable hypotheses, speculations, and still not excluded possibilities. Directions for future research are also suggested.

The book is supplemented by sixteen appendices, a comprehensive bibliography (almost six hundred entries), a short author's biography, and an index.

Summing up, I very highly evaluate the book by David R. Harris, not only because it adds new data and new ideas to a problem which has fascinated me for a long time, but also because it excellently follows the standards of an interdisciplinary publication. I am convinced that it will be an important source of reference, not only for the researchers working in Central Asia.

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