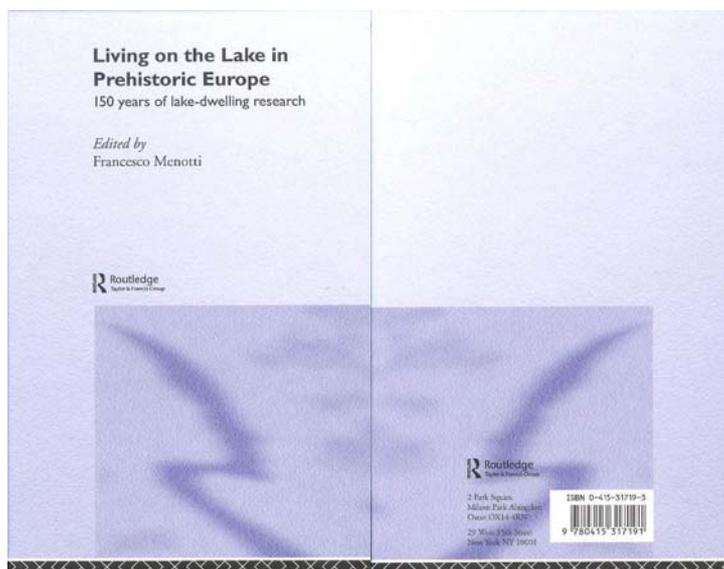


Menotti, F. Ed. 2004. Living on the lake in prehistoric Europe. 150 years of lake-dwelling research. – London/New York, Routledge

Book review by E.N.A. Heirbaut



In 1854, due to a harsh winter followed by an unusually dry summer, the level of Lake Zurich dropped. This revealed the remains of several ancient lakeside villages. Although some of them were already known by local people, they were never officially reported to the authorities. In 1854 however, Johannes Aeppli, a school teacher, discovered the remains of such a lakeside village at Ober-Meilen. He reported them, and by doing so, triggered a debate that would have enormous implications on wetland archaeological studies. The first report was published by the end of 1854 by Ferdinand Keller: 'Die keltischen pfahlbauten in den Schweizerseen'.

By the end of the century, hundreds of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites had been discovered across Europe. They were all interpreted according to Keller's theory, as being built on stilts and platforms above the water. It was only in the beginning of the 20th century that a few scholars started to question this theory. They advanced the idea that the lake villages had in fact been constructed on dry ground near the lakeside. Several years of heated academic disputes followed.

Now, 150 years later, this dispute has transformed the 'Lake-dwelling phenomenon' into one of the most reliable sources of information in wetland archaeology. This well-illustrated book gives an overview of the development of the study, but also emphasizes the impact of a range of scientific techniques on the settlements.

The first eight essays provide us with a well-documented overview of the development of the study, based on case studies from across Europe, including lake-dwelling sites in Switzerland, Germany, France, Austria, Slovenia, Italy and Britain. In all countries, different stages within this development can be seen. In a first stage, the idea that these villages were built on a platform on open water dominated the scientific world. Unfortunately, during these years of research, most attention was paid to the artefacts, the real 'treasures' of these villages. Looting became common and therefore many countries cancelled their research by the end of the century. By the beginning of the 20th century, the first professional excavations were undertaken. This was, amongst others, the case at the Federsee, where the Institute of Prehistoric Research at Tübingen University discovered several settlements. It is only in the 1950s and 1960s that systematic research is done, but still the impact of the information from these villages was underestimated. In the following years, more and more scientists accept the new theories concerning the 'Pfahlbauten'. Not only were new technologies applied, there was also an increased support of natural sciences and attention was paid to cultural, environmental and economical aspects.

In the second part of the book, several authors focus on the application of natural sciences on the evidence of the lake-dwellings, such as dendrochronology, palaeoclimatology, archaeobotany, and underwater archaeology. The good preservation of the timber posts and floors/platforms along with the increasing development of dendrochronological methods resulted in the fact that the Neolithic and Bronze Age occupation in the Alpine region can now be followed on a calendrical time scale. The discrepancy between the results for the region north and south of the Alps is not only due to a later start of the research but also to a lack of wood preservation in the south, and a larger discontinuity of wetland occupation. In combination with other disciplines, like for example palaeoclimatology or archaeobotany, dendrochronology is more than just a dating

technique; it can provide precise references about human–environment relations in the past. However, there are still many gaps to be filled. In several essays, the fact that the regions south of the Alps need more and closer research is stressed.

The third part of the book, which is in fact just one essay, deals with new perspectives in lake–settlement research. It focuses (p. 207) “on what happened once the settlements were abandoned, where those groups went and how they coped with a different environment [...] and what led them to repopulate places which their ancestors had previously abandoned.” In this chapter Francesco Menotti illustrates that critical changes, whether they are environmental, political or economical, lead to shifting settlement areas and even new social patterns.

Finally, three authors try to find the balance between the experts and the public. It is a fact that the research of lake–dwellings and lake–dwelling societies generated a great deal of information. Surprisingly enough, not much of this knowledge has been discussed in education and in museology in the past. And when it has been, it was often linked to the time spirit and fashion instead of scientific facts. It is crucial that scientists as well as the public are attentive to the danger that lies in this. Nowadays, more and more scholars are aware of the fact that more public–orientated research is needed. An even more crucial problem is funding: high research costs due to large rescue excavations and management of the sites, artefacts and documentation are a threat to this well–preserved heritage.

Discussing all essays in this well–written book would take us too far. In general we can say that it takes the reader on a journey through time to discover the fascinating history of the lake–dwelling research and many of the problems it has encountered. This captivating story is illustrated with many outstanding photographs and maps of the different sites. Moreover, it provides the reader with a great deal of information about the different disciplines that make this research possible. Finally, it tries to bridge the gap between the pile of scientific information and the public, since there is no doubt that people are in fact very much interested in the Neolithic and Bronze Age societies who populated the shores of the lakes of Europe. To conclude, we can say that this book is not only very pleasant to read, it also succeeds in drawing a sharp picture of the lake–dwelling phenomenon.

Menotti, F. Ed. 2004. Living on the lake in prehistoric Europe. 150 years of lake–dwelling research. – London/New York, Routledge. 286 pp. ISBN 0 415 31720 7 (paperback)/0 415 31719 3 (hardback). Price £22.50 (paperback)/£65.00 (hardback).

Cited literature

Keller, F. 1854. Die keltischen pfahlbauten in den Schweizerseen. – Zürich, Mitteilungen der Antiquarischen Gesellschaft.

Drs. E.N.A. Heirbaut
Archol BV
e.heirbaut@archol.nl
nweurope@palarch.nl