Review Article: Iron in Archaeology: The European Bloomery Smelters by Radomír Pleiner

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Iron in archaeology: The European bloomery smelters by Radomír Pleiner Archeologický ústav AV, Prague, 2000. xviii + 400pp, A4, 73 figs, 24 plates, 2 glossaries, bibliography, 2 indexes. ISBN 80-86124-26-6. £22 (hb) from Archeologický ústav AV, Letenská 4, 11801 Prague 1, Czech Republic, fax: +420-02-57532288, e-mail: knihovna@arup.cas.cz

Since its formation in 1966, Radomír Pleiner has been the secretary and guiding light of the Comité pour la Sidérurgie Ancienne (the committee for ancient ironworking) of the UISPP, editing the twice-yearly Communications which appear in the periodical Archeologické rozhlédy, Prague. These communications have acted as an information exchange network for the ever increasing band of scholars working in this field, with accounts of work in progress, news of meetings and conferences, and abstracts of books and papers. Over the years thousands of items have been published, a clear indication of the development of early ironworking scholarship, in which Pleiner himself has played a central role, sharing information and encouraging new workers. Two key elements in this have been Pleiner’s linguistic skills and his enormous capacity for work. His mastery of numerous languages has enabled him to act as a bridge between east and west and his personal contribution can be gauged from his 40 bibliographic entries (only a small part of the whole) covering a period of over 50 years. These include such classics as his 1962 volume, Staré evropské kovářství (Ancient European blacksmithing) and his 1993 volume on the Celtic Sword, as well as a series of seminal papers on several key aspects of the subject.

The fruits of this labour can now be fully appreciated by all in: Iron in Archaeology: The European Bloomery smelters. This is a masterly synthesis of a vast amount of information, most of which has been generated in the past fifty years or so. The opening section of the book is a six page introduction which provides a very useful summary of the development of ironworking studies, reviewing major projects and publications, the growth of experimental ironworking, major conferences and, finally, a list of some 80 scholars spanning four generations, who have made a significant contribution to the topic. This introduction also highlights some of the topics and regions which require further study, pointing the way for the next generation of scholars.

The structure of the book has been thought out very carefully, allowing a vast amount of information to be presented in a systematic manner. The opening three chapters are a broad chronological survey of the evidence for ironworking. This is followed by a sequence of ten chapters starting with an overview of site types, working through the ore and fuel resources, the process itself, a major chapter on furnace types and then detailed examinations of air delivery systems, reheating hearths, blooms and slags. This approach results in some overlap and repetition, but it allows the author to expand on specific themes within a clear conceptual framework. The final chapter is a brave attempt to synthesise the main themes within a broad cultural and economic framework.

It would be impossible to review adequately such a detailed and wide-ranging work without writing a small volume, so great is the range of sites and topics covered. Comment will, therefore, be limited to a brief description of each chapter, highlighting a few issues of especial interest to British readers.

The first three chapters summarize the evidence for ironworking in a broad chronological framework. Chapter 1, The birth of iron smelting, reviews the finds of very early iron objects (14 from before 3000 BC), the early terminology for iron, Royal iron, a discussion of the probable development of smelting from copper-working and the early spread of iron in SW Asia and Greece. Much of the work covered in this chapter was