

## Book Review

### Buchbesprechung

**Kurt Felix Hillgruber, *The Last Hunter-Gatherers. The Epipaleolithic in Southwestern Syria*.**

Tübingen Publications on the Archaeology of Southwestern Asia. Tübingen: Kerns Verlag, 2023. 17 x 24 cm, hardcover, 342 pages, 177 illustrations, 110 tables. ISBN 978-3-935751-26-1.

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The Last Hunter-Gatherers by Felix Hillgruber is the long-awaited publication of the results of his dissertation project conducted between 2004 and 2010. The Syrian war brought the project and much more research to an end. I was also a member of the Tübingen team that conducted fieldwork in Syria, and it is thus a special pleasure for me to discuss this book. It brings back memories of a great team, an inspiring working environment and in particular a great place on earth. I deeply hope that we will have the chance to go back to Ma'aloula and Jabrud one day, and I fully agree with Sultan Muhesen that reviving Syrian-German collaboration would be a great possibility for supporting the documentation and protection of Syrian Stone Age heritage. I cross my fingers that this day will come soon.

The book opens with a foreword by Nicholas J. Conard, series editor and head of the German part of the *Tübingen-Damaskus Ausgrabungs- und Survey Projekt* (TDASP). Prof. Conard provides some important background information on the initiation and development of the TDASP project, which also included Hillgruber's dissertation project presented here. The book is organized in ten chapters. After a general introduction (Chapter 1), the author provides the reader with the required background in research history (Chapter 2) as well as geography and environment (Chapter 3), followed by chapters dealing with the excavation method and stratigraphic context of the studied assemblages (Chapter 4) as well as their detailed presentation (Chapters 5 and 6). Chronological aspects (Chapter 7) and comparable sites (Chapter 8) provide the foundation for contextualization and conclusions (Chapter 9). A summary (Chapter 10) in English, German and French as well as the list of cited references wrap up this book. The general structure

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Cite this article: Bretzke, K. 2024. Book Review: Kurt Felix Hillgruber, *The Last Hunter-Gatherers. The Epipaleolithic in Southwestern Syria*. MGfU 32: 119–122.

of the book largely follows standards in the presentation of archaeological sites and finds, only the lack of clear separation of analytical methods and stone artifact presentation in chapter 5 is in my view disadvantageous.

Chapter 1 – Introduction. This is a short chapter describing foundations and goals of the presented project. The author states that only little is known about the terminal Pleistocene archaeology in the working region, about 50 km northeast of Damascus, and hence the sites and assemblages to be described will fill in an important gap. The primary goal of Hillgruber's research is to describe Upper Paleolithic (UP), Epipaleolithic (EP) and early Neolithic finds from southwestern Syria and establish their exact chronological position. Besides this descriptive work, the author claims to address questions that go beyond description, including whether results from this project can contribute to discussions concerning variability and dimensions of certain industries, whether they help to identify traditions and ethnic groups and whether gaps occur in the chrono-cultural stratigraphy, and if so, what were potential reasons? As we will see later, describing and comparing findings are definite strengths of the book, while the author's answers to some of the raised questions remain difficult to find. This might in part be related to broad definitions, such as the phrase "dimensions of certain industries." What dimensions are meant here: chronological, cultural, demographic, spatial?

Chapter 2 – Background and Historical Overview. Over the scope of 32 pages the author provides a detailed and well-prepared chapter that allows the reader easy access to the topic and lays the foundations for the later comparative work. All relevant sites and technocomplexes are extensively presented, and their descriptions are easy to follow. Particularly helpful is the summary of defining attributes and sites containing the respective technocomplex at the end of each entity. While the description of sites and assemblages is very good, the first three pages where some aspects of the research history are presented, lacks, from my point of view, the necessary detail. For example, what were these theories that the early archaeologists used with regard to the microliths (page 15, line 15)? Why was there a switch in focus from Epipaleolithic to Neolithic in the 1950s (page 16, line 5)? Also, a brief introduction and discussion of the meanings of terms such as phases, facies, industries and complexes (page 17, line 1) would have been helpful.

Chapter 3 – Geographical and Environmental Setting. This short chapter provides the climatic, geographic and environmental context of the studied assemblages. I fully agree with the author that understanding interdependencies between humans and the environment in which they resided are of crucial importance. Given this, the information in this chapter is too concise. I would argue that this chapter requires for example a map showing the structure of the landscape of the working area and a figure showing climate proxy data. The landscape has been described (page 50) but if figure 150 (page 232) would have been shown here, for example, landscape characteristics would be much easier for the reader to understand. While lithics information is highly useful and well prepared (as we saw in chapter 2 and will later see in chapter 5), the chapter is less successful in its presentation of non-lithics information. Minor errors in the referencing are also present (page 50: Tensorer et al. 2007 should read Le Tensorer et al. 2007, and Drechsler et al. 2012 is not in the reference list).

Chapter 4 – Excavation and Stratigraphy. The fourth chapter details excavation techniques and stratigraphic context of the analyzed assemblages from the sites of Baaz Rockshelter, Kaus Kozah Cave, Ain Dabbour and Yabroud III. The first three sites were excavated by TDASP teams between 1999 and 2006 under the direction of Nicholas Conard, while Yabroud III was excavated by Alfred Rust in the 1930s. Information and illustrations provided here are of appropriate detail, allowing the reader to follow the conclusions of the author. The author, however, failed to explain the naming convention for the excavated squares from the TDASP work, which makes it difficult to follow for readers not trained in Tübingen or at Tübingen Paleolithic excavations. The text preparation could have been better edited in places. What for example is a musty matrix (page 56, line 6) and what is areal A or B (e.g., page 75, line 7ff)? From my point of view the discussion parts in the presentation of Baaz Rockshelter (page 62, line 13 ff) and Kaus Kozah Cave (page 73, line 18 ff) get lost in the context of chapter four and would have been better placed in chapter nine.

Chapters 5 – Stone Tool Assemblage, Sampling and Analytical Methods. Covering 171 pages, this chapter provides the methodological background of the stone artifact analysis, the presentation of the lithic finds, their attributes and the interpretation of finds and sites, both from intra-site and inter-site perspectives. This chapter is the core of the book and provides impressive detail about the analyzed assemblages. Results of the attribute analysis is presented in 97 data tables and many aspects are visualized in the 90 figures of the chapter. The majority of figures and tables are well-organized and readable. Most tables show only counts, and not percentages, which would make it easier for the reader to compare among the different assemblages. Highly useful and of key importance for understanding the presented records are the 48 figures presented here, with drawings of lithic artifacts providing an outstanding overview of the lithic assemblages. The information of this chapter will facilitate using the assemblages from the Damascus Province in future comparative research.

Chapter 6 – Organic Material. The title of this very short chapter is somehow misleading since the author focuses on personal ornaments made from marine mollusks and does not present the bone assemblage. Hillgruber's project did not include the bones, so it might be reasonable to exclude these, but one could have named the chapter differently. Personal ornaments are of course of extraordinary importance given their information potential on chronology and technological knowledge, but also on social networks, spatial connectivity and cultural traditions. The author decided to discuss only some functional aspects and mainly their chronological information content. A broader view on the topic and an overview on the situation regarding personal ornaments in the Levant would have added significantly to the reach of the book.

Chapter 7 – Radiocarbon Dating. This chapter provides all basic information on the chronometric dating of assemblages from Baaz Rockshelter and Kaus Kozah Cave. For Ain Dabbour and Yabroud there are no absolute dates available.

Chapter 8 – Comparable Sites. In addition to chapter 6, this chapter is of critical importance. The chapter is chronologically organized and starts with comparable sites from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic, and continues with Natufian, Geometric Kebarian and finally Early Epipaleolithic

sites. I very much appreciate that the author has assembled this comprehensive database and in particular that many drawings are part of this presentation, which provides greater insight into the topic. I only missed a map showing all sites that are presented in this chapter.

Chapter 9 – Conclusions. The conclusions chapter summarizes the main findings of this study, including a continuous settlement of the region during the Epipaleolithic, even in dry phases such as the Younger Dryas (ca. 9,600-10,800 BC) and a function of the analyzed sites as hunting camps. Moreover, the results presented here close a gap in Levantine prehistory and contribute to our understanding of an important period in human evolution, namely the transition from mobile to sedentary lifestyles and from hunting and gathering to food production.

Chapter 10 – Summary | Zusammenfassung | Résumé. A trilingual summary concludes the book.

To conclude, first and foremost, I congratulate Felix Hillgruber for finally publishing his work. It is to the author's and editor's credit that they mastered all imponderables over the years and have shown perseverance in finally producing this book. In times where it is generally expected to split complex research results into rather short papers it cannot be valued highly enough when reference books like this are produced. I particularly liked the production of the book. The binding is very solid and allows easy handling.

I would have liked the author to have gone beyond the description of the finds more often and to have included his own conclusions and opinions regarding broader research questions as he promised to do so in the introduction (p.13). However, my critiques are minor as compared to the importance of the information provided on the excavated assemblages. I am convinced that this book will develop into a standard reference work for the Late Upper Paleolithic, Epipaleolithic and PPN of the central Levant and will serve as a foundation for many future research projects. The publication of this research is all the more important because it presents important results from fieldwork and of the TDASP. This research was brought to a sudden end by the Syrian civil war. Over the subsequent years no fieldwork has been attempted in Syria, and this book recalls a period when the prehistory of Syria made numerous key contributions to Stone Age studies in southwest Asia.