## Z knihy [*The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*](https://www.amazon.com/Dawn-Everything-New-History-Humanity/dp/B08TYBMHGV/ref%3Dsr_1_1?adgrpid=1332609291149938&hvadid=83288247211093&hvbmt=be&hvdev=c&hvlocphy=138926&hvnetw=o&hvqmt=e&hvtargid=kwd-83288888621018%3Aloc-51&hydadcr=3505_11621997&keywords=the+dawn+of+everything+by+david+graeber+and+david+wengrow&qid=1684228294&sr=8-1)

by David Graeber, David Wengrow, et al. 2021

**ON ‘MEGA-SITES’, AND HOW ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDINGS IN UKRAINE ARE OVERTURNING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM ON THE ORIGINS OF CITIES**

The remote history of the countries around the Black Sea is awash with gold. At least, any casual visitor to the major museums of Sofia, Kiev or Tbilisi could be forgiven for leaving with this impression. Ever since the days of Herodotus, outsiders to the region have come home full of lurid tales about the lavish funerals of warrior-kings, and the mass slaughter of horses and retainers that accompanied them. Over 1,000 years later, in the tenth century AD, the traveller Ibn Fadlan was telling almost identical stories to impress and titillate his Arab readers.

As a result, in these lands the term ‘prehistory’ (or sometimes ‘proto-history’) has always evoked the legacy of aristocratic tribes and lavish tombs crammed with treasure. Such tombs are, certainly, there to be found. On the region’s western flank, in Bulgaria, they begin with the gold-soaked cemetery of Varna, oddly placed in what regional archaeologists refer to as the Copper Age, corresponding to the fifth millennium BC. To the east, in southernmost Russia, a tradition of extravagant funeral rites began shortly after, associated with burial mounds known as *kurgans*, which do indeed mark the resting places of warrior princes of one sort or another.21

But it turns out this wasn’t the whole story. In fact, magnificent warrior tombs might not even be the most interesting aspect of the region’s prehistory. There were also cities. Archaeologists in Ukraine and Moldova got their first inkling of them in the 1970s, when they began to detect the existence of human settlements older and much larger than anything they had previously encountered.22 Further research showed that these settlements, often referred to as ‘mega-sites’ – with their modern names of Taljanky, Maidenetske, Nebelivka and so on – dated to the early and middle centuries of the fourth millennium BC, which meant that some existed even before the earliest known cities in Mesopotamia. They were also larger in area.

Yet, even now, in scholarly discussions about the origins of urbanism, these Ukrainian sites almost never come up. Indeed, the very use of the term ‘mega-site’ is a kind of euphemism, signalling to a wider audience that these should not be thought of as proper cities but as something more like villages that for some reason had expanded inordinately in size. Some archaeologists even refer to them outright as ‘overgrown villages’. How do we account for this reluctance to welcome the Ukrainian mega-sites into the charmed circle of urban origins? Why has anyone with even a passing interest in the origin of cities heard of Uruk or Mohenjo-daro, but almost no one of Taljanky?

The answer is largely political. Some of it concerns simple geopolitics: much of the initial work of discovery was carried out by Eastern Bloc scholars during the Cold War, which not only slowed down the reception of their findings in Western academic circles but tended to tinge any news of surprising discoveries with at least a tiny bit of scepticism. Even more, perhaps, it had to do with the internal political life of the prehistoric settlements themselves. That is, according to conventional views of politics, there didn’t seem to be any. No evidence was unearthed of centralized government or administration – or indeed, any form of ruling class. In other words, these enormous settlements had all the hallmarks of what evolutionists would call a ‘simple’, not a ‘complex’ society.

It’s hard here not to recall Ursula Le Guin’s famous short story ‘The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas’, about the imaginary city of Omelas, a city which also made do without kings, wars, slaves or secret police. We have a tendency, Le Guin notes, to write off such a community as ‘simple’, but in fact these citizens of Omelas were ‘not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. They were not less complex than us.’ The trouble is just that ‘we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid.’

Le Guin has a point. Obviously, we have no idea how relatively happy the inhabitants of Ukrainian mega-sites like Maidenetske or Nebelivka were, compared to the lords who constructed *kurgan* burials, or even the retainers ritually sacrificed at their funerals; or the bonded labourers who provided wheat and barley to the inhabitants of later Greek colonies along the Black Sea coast (though we can guess), and as anyone who has read the story knows, Omelas had some problems too. But the point remains: why do we assume that people who have figured out a way for a large population to govern and support itself without temples, palaces and military fortifications – that is, without overt displays of arrogance, self-abasement and cruelty – are somehow less complex than those who have not?

Why would we hesitate to dignify such a place with the name of ‘city’?

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[21] Anthony 2007.

[22] Much of this research (published exclusively in Russian) was cutting-edge by the standards of the time, including aerial photography, subsurface prospection and careful excavation. For summaries and descriptions in English see Videiko 1996; Menotti and Korvin-Piotrovskiy 2012.