

BOOK REVIEW – RECENZE

Jan Turek: První Evropané. Archeologie počátků evropské identity. Academia, Praha 2026, ISBN 978-80-200-3701-5, 360 pages, published in Czech.

If one were to characterise Jan Turek's *První Evropané* (*First Europeans*) in a single sentence, it would perhaps be best described as an archaeological essay on the long-term cultural foundations of Europe. The book is far more than a conventional synthesis of European prehistory. Rather, it represents an ambitious attempt to interpret the emergence of European civilisation through the transformative processes associated mainly with the Neolithic. Although the volume is published only in Czech, it deserves particular attention from an international audience interested in current Central European archaeological thought and in broader debates concerning the cultural significance of early agricultural societies.

The book is substantial in both physical and intellectual scope. Richly illustrated and stylistically polished, it combines scientific synthesis with essayistic reflection and occasionally openly philosophical commentary. Turek is already well known internationally for his work on European prehistory, monumentality, Bell Beaker archaeology, gender, and symbolic systems. Many themes familiar from his earlier scholarly publications reappear here, yet transformed into a more accessible and synthetic form. The result is neither a popularisation in the simplistic sense nor a narrowly academic monograph. Rather, the book occupies an intermediate genre that has become relatively rare among contemporary Central European scholars: a deeply informed civilisational essay grounded in archaeological evidence. The chronological emphasis placed throughout the volume on the Neolithic is hardly accidental. These periods are presented as formative stages in the emergence of specifically European cultural patterns, but they also reflect the author's own long-term scholarly specialisation in the archaeology of the European Copper Age and specifically Bell Beaker societies.

The central argument is introduced already in the preface. Turek explicitly frames the Neolithic as the decisive threshold in the formation of European cultural identity. The first farmers are presented not merely as one prehistoric population among many, but as the creators of enduring cultural patterns that still shape Europe today: attitudes toward landscape, domesticated food, alcohol consumption, kinship, monumentality, social hierarchy, warfare, gender, mobility, and religion. Throughout the volume, archaeology is repeatedly mobilised not simply as a method for reconstructing the past, but as a means of reflecting critically on the contemporary world, including the Anthropocene, ecological crisis, globalisation, pandemics, and the future sustainability of civilisation itself.

This broad interpretative ambition gives the book its coherence. Individual chapters often move far beyond the descriptive presentation of archaeological data and instead ask how long-term historical processes shaped specifically European mentalities and social habits. The final chapter, significantly entitled *What Makes Us Europeans*, synthesises these reflections into a larger argument concerning migration, hybridity, openness, and the shared cultural inheritance of Europe. Turek explicitly rejects ethnically essentialist conceptions of Europe and emphasises the continent's millennia-long history of population movement, admixture, and cultural synthesis instead. Such reflections inevitably resonate with current political debates, yet the author generally avoids simplistic ideological formulations and grounds his interpretations in archaeological and archaeogenetic discourse.

Humans, animals, and the making of culture

The first chapter introduces the tension between nature and culture as one of the book's recurring themes. Turek forcefully rejects romantic notions of primordial harmony between humans and nature and instead presents humanity as a fundamentally transformative species. Human evolution is described through the development of cooperation, technology, hunting strategies, cooking practices, and eventually domestication. Particularly memorable are the sections devoted to the domestication

of dogs and cats, where archaeological evidence, genetics, behavioural ecology, and historical anecdote are woven into an engaging narrative. The discussion of domestication repeatedly emphasises reciprocity and co-evolution: humans domesticated animals, but domesticated plants and animals simultaneously transformed humans themselves. Wheat becomes metaphorically ‘the slave-master’, agriculture a process of mutual dependence rather than simple human triumph over nature.

One of the strongest qualities of the book is precisely this ability to connect archaeological evidence with broader anthropological interpretations. Turek constantly moves between empirical detail and general reflection. Discussions of stable isotopes, archaeogenetics, or settlement archaeology are interwoven with myths, literary references, historical parallels, and contemporary social observations. Occasionally, this associative method produces speculative or deliberately provocative interpretations, but more often it succeeds in making archaeological evidence intellectually vivid and culturally meaningful.

Domus, ancestors, and the Neolithic transformation

The second and third chapters focus on the origins of farming societies in the Near East and the spread of the Neolithic into Europe. Here Turek develops one of the core conceptual oppositions of the volume: *domus* versus *agrios* — the domesticated human world contrasted with wilderness. The emergence of permanent houses, ancestor cults, household continuity, and genealogical thinking is treated as a revolutionary transformation in human consciousness. Sites such as Jericho and Çatalhöyük are interpreted not merely as archaeological settlements, but as places where entirely new concepts of home, ancestry, and sacred space emerged. Particularly interesting is the treatment of plastered skulls and intramural burials as material manifestations of new relationships between the living and the dead.

The chapter *Neolithic (R)evolution?* is among the most theoretically ambitious sections of the volume. The deliberately stylised title already signals a degree of scepticism toward simplistic revolutionary narratives. Turek engages critically with current debates surrounding the pace and variability of Neolithisation and repeatedly stresses the complexity, reversibility, and regional diversity of these processes. Especially notable is his discussion of Graeber and Wengrow’s (2021) ideas concerning gendered dimensions of early cultivation and sedentism. Rather than accepting such models uncritically, Turek integrates them cautiously into a broader framework of gradual experimentation and mixed subsistence strategies.

The archaeology of consumption and social practice

Many readers will likely remember above all the more unconventional thematic chapters, which distinguish this book from standard archaeological syntheses. Particularly remarkable is the chapter *In the Beginning There Was Beer*, devoted to alcohol, fermentation, ritual drinking, and sociality. Turek argues that collective alcohol consumption became one of the defining social institutions of early farming societies and eventually a deeply rooted feature of European civilisation. The discussion moves from Near Eastern fermentation practices to prehistoric drinking feasts, ritual hospitality, and even modern cultural differences in attitudes toward alcohol. Some readers may find parts of this argument somewhat overstated or intentionally provocative, yet it undeniably succeeds in demonstrating how archaeology can illuminate long-term cultural practices that extend far beyond subsistence alone.

Similarly original is the chapter on the milk revolution. Here Turek combines archaeogenetics, dietary adaptation, dairying technologies, and cultural history into a compelling discussion of lactase persistence and the symbolic importance of milk products in Europe. The passages devoted to bog butter are especially memorable, balancing scientific explanation with vivid storytelling and historical imagination. Such examples illustrate one of the author’s major strengths residing in the ability to transform seemingly marginal archaeological phenomena into windows onto broader civilisational processes.

Ritual landscapes and the symbolic order

Another major thematic block concerns monumentality, ritual landscapes, sacred mountains, and cosmology. Long barrows, ditch enclosures, megalithic monuments, solar symbolism, and ritual topographies are interpreted as expressions of collective memory and ancestral time. Turek repeatedly returns to the relationship between landscape and identity, especially within the Central European context. The discussion of Mount Říp and other symbolic landscapes is particularly revealing in this respect, connecting prehistoric cosmologies with later national mythologies.

This part of the book is especially important because it reflects one of the author's principal current research specialisations. The interpretations presented here build on Turek's long-term research into Late Neolithic monumentality and ritual landscapes, recently synthesised in the volume *The Tombs of Forefathers: Neolithic Long Barrows in Ritual Landscapes* (Turek – Křišťuf 2025; reviewed by Bradley 2026).

Turek consistently interprets long barrows and related ritual structures not as isolated funerary monuments, but as elements of broader symbolic landscapes linking ancestry, territory, cosmology, and social memory. Particularly convincing is his emphasis on the long-term persistence of sacred places, many of which retained symbolic importance for millennia. Sacred mountains, rivers, causewayed enclosure sanctuaries, and burial mounds are presented as interconnected components of prehistoric cosmological systems rather than isolated ritual features.

Equally noteworthy is the author's attention to the sensory and spatial dimensions of ritual landscapes. Monument orientation, visibility, movement through the landscape, and relationships to prominent topographic features are all interpreted as meaningful aspects of prehistoric ceremonial practice. These sections rank among the strongest and most conceptually coherent parts of the book and demonstrate particularly clearly Turek's ability to combine detailed archaeological knowledge with broader interpretative synthesis.

Bodies, identities, and the archaeology of power

The chapters devoted to epidemics, warfare, and gender demonstrate the breadth of the book's ambitions. Turek discusses prehistoric disease within the wider history of global pandemics and explicitly links Neolithic demographic growth, sedentism, and domestication to the emergence of epidemic vulnerability. The chapter on warfare ranges from Copper Age daggers to nuclear deterrence, occasionally producing intentionally unsettling analogies between prehistory and the modern world. Likewise, the chapter *Gender, Graves and Amazons* combines funerary archaeology, symbolic systems, and contemporary debates about gender identities. The famous Bell Beaker burial from Tišice receives substantial attention as evidence that biological sex and socially performed gender roles need not coincide. Such passages clearly aim not only to interpret prehistory but also to contribute to present-day discussions concerning identity and social norms.

A significant contribution to European prehistoric studies

Stylistically, the book is unusually readable for a work so deeply saturated with archaeological material. Turek writes with considerable rhetorical confidence and evident pleasure in storytelling. He frequently employs irony, metaphor, and provocative formulations. At times, the text resembles a scholarly essay; elsewhere, it approaches philosophical reflection or even cultural criticism. This stylistic hybridity is both one of the book's greatest assets and one of its potential weaknesses. Readers seeking a strictly neutral or methodologically restrained archaeological synthesis may occasionally feel uncomfortable with the author's readiness to generalise or to draw long interpretative arcs connecting prehistory and modernity. Yet such risks are inseparable from the intellectual ambition of the project itself.

The volume is also visually impressive. Photographs, reconstructions, site images, maps, and artefact illustrations are integrated thoughtfully throughout the text and often become part of the argument itself. Particularly striking is the recurring motif of the 'Amazon' from Tišice (once excavated

by the author himself), appearing on the cover and within the gender chapter. The visual programme reinforces the book's broader attempt to bridge academic archaeology and public imagination.

A minor reservation concerns the treatment of references and primary literature. While some sections of the book are carefully documented and guide the reader directly to the relevant scholarly debates, other interpretative passages rely more heavily on synthetic narrative without equally detailed citation support. Given the intellectual richness of the volume, a more consistently explicit referencing system throughout would have further strengthened its value for specialist readers wishing to follow particular arguments back to their empirical and theoretical foundations.

Naturally, a work of this scale and interpretative breadth invites criticism. Specialists in individual subfields will undoubtedly disagree with certain generalisations or with the degree of confidence attached to some hypotheses. At times, the book tends toward cultural-essentialist formulations concerning 'Europeans' and 'European mentality', even if these are elsewhere moderated by explicit emphasis on hybridity and migration. Some comparisons between prehistoric and contemporary social phenomena occasionally appear more metaphorical than analytically rigorous. Yet these reservations should not obscure the larger achievement of the volume.

What makes *První Evropané* genuinely important is its attempt to restore archaeology to the centre of broader intellectual and societal reflection. In an academic environment increasingly dominated by specialisation and methodological fragmentation, Turek offers a rare synthetic vision connecting material culture, environment, symbolism, genetics, economy, ritual, and long-term historical identity. The book demonstrates how prehistoric archaeology can contribute not only to knowledge about the past, but also to contemporary debates concerning ecology, migration, identity, inequality, and civilisation itself.

For non-Czech readers, the publication is additionally valuable as an insight into current Czech archaeological thought. Central European archaeology has long cultivated broad synthetic and interdisciplinary traditions, yet much of this intellectual production remains linguistically inaccessible internationally. *První Evropané* deserves attention precisely because it represents a mature and distinctive contribution to ongoing European debates about the meaning of the Neolithic and the cultural roots of Europe itself.

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References

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