

To be or not to be: Considering the origins of proto-urbanism in prehistoric Europe

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Proto-urbanism in prehistoric Europe is currently defined as the emergence of large, complex settlements that supported dense populations and social differentiation but lacked the formal planning, centralized authority, and monumental infrastructure of true cities. The earliest widely accepted proto-urban centres in temperate Europe date to the end of the 7th through the 5th centuries BC, i.e., the Early Iron Age. The resilience and scale of these communities—whether short-lived or long-occupied—are reflected in the physical footprint and layout of their settlements, where expansive ground plans, compact building clusters, and specialized spaces for ritual or craft production indicate the capacity to support substantial populations. In recent years, an increasing number of sites have shown dense occupation without meeting traditional criteria for 'proto-urban' status. This challenges how prehistoric archaeology defines social complexity arising and persisting in settings where such special-use areas are minimal or absent. By examining 'atypical' proto-urban sites—ranging from densely occupied hillforts to large unfortified communities where daily life and specialized activities are woven together without fixed boundaries—this session explores the diversity of early complex settlements across different regions and periods. It invites thoughtful (re-)consideration of the notion that proto-urbanism requires the formal spatial separation found in later urban centres, such as Oppida, and aims to critically reflect on which physical and social markers should be considered defining for proto-urbanism.