



Book Reviews

COTON PARK, RUGBY, WARWICKSHIRE: A MIDDLE IRON AGE SETTLEMENT WITH COPPER ALLOY CASTING BY ANDY CHAPMAN

Archaeopress, Oxford, 2020, 166pp, 103 B&W and col figs, 79 tables, pb, ISBN 978-1 78969-645-5, £35.00

This volume publishes the results of excavations undertaken by Northamptonshire Archaeology, now MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology), more than 20 years ago, with final preparation of the report undertaken by the principal author in 2019–20 following his retirement. In addition to the Middle Iron Age settlement which forms the main focus of the report, the opportunity has been taken in the final chapter to present the Neolithic–Romano-British results from the site at Coton Medieval Village a short distance to the north, also excavated in 1998 and covering a similar three hectare area.

Neolithic and Early Bronze Age evidence is restricted to a few struck flints and a fragment of unsourced polished axe. The earliest features comprise a small group of Middle Bronze Age pits on each site, one producing a bronze dagger and another pottery from at least six Deverel-Rimbury vessels. In addition, a group of eight or more heavily truncated Middle Bronze Age unurned cremation burials were recorded on the Coton Medieval Village site, one with an accessory vessel.

The bulk of the volume is made up of the description of the Middle Iron Age open settlement, originating in the 5th century and continuing through until abandonment in the mid-2nd century BC, with four phases identified. Within the 100 hectare development site this area was targeted on the basis of geophysical results, and despite the impact of medieval ridge-and-furrow, and appallingly wet working conditions, a coherent plan of the settlement was obtained. Some 30 ring-gullies associated with roundhouses were uncovered, along with 12 larger enclosures and a probably L-shaped boundary ditch of uncertain extent. The sequence began with a single roundhouse group and enclosure, succeeded by the principal roundhouse group and at least two other groups, along with several enclosures, during expansion in the 4th–3rd centuries BC, one of the groups the focus for copper alloy casting.

The Middle Iron Age complex was followed, around the early 1st century BC, by what may have been a ladder settlement that appears to have persisted into the early Roman period. At Coton Medieval Village, limited probably Late Iron Age remains were succeeded by more extensive but

artefactually poor ditches representing part of a Romano-British farmstead, with concentric ring-ditches within a rectangular enclosure tentatively interpreted as a possible Late Iron Age/Early Romano-British shrine.

The finds reports were largely completed following the excavation, but some have been updated where necessary to take account of more recent discoveries, specifically sites at the Daventry International Rail Freight Terminal (DIRFT), 7–8 km to the south-east (Masefield *et al.* 2015). The Iron Age pottery report, in particular, has been revised and remains one of the larger assemblages of this date from the region to have been analysed and published, the relatively large quantity of Scored Ware likely to reflect the earlier Middle Iron Age *flourit* of the settlement.

Other than pottery, finds such as fired clay loomweights, quernstones, rubstones and worked bone occur in small numbers and are not exceptional, however the evidence for copper alloy working is unusual. This came from the centre of the settlement, largely confined to the eastern half of a ring-ditch and the corner of an adjacent enclosure. Sherds from at least 14 small, triangular crucibles with conical bases were recovered, along with approximately 460 fragments (6.71kg) of investment moulds. These are likely to have been used for casting horse harness fittings, the single diagnostic fragment representing a small side link from a three-link bridle bit; there is no evidence for the production of terret rings or lynch pins. Two parts of bar mould were also present. Analysis of metal prills in the crucibles (by Matthew Ponting) showed examples of copper, tin, and bronze, indicating that primary alloying as well as the recycling of bronze was undertaken. A small concentration of bone and antler working waste and two of the three handles found came from the same area, raising the possibility of contemporary craft activity.

A moderately large assemblage of animal bone was recovered, rare for this period in Warwickshire, and though generally in accordance with elsewhere in the Midlands, cattle were more dominant rather than the similar number of cattle and sheep usually seen. Somewhat surprisingly there was no evidence from the charcoal analysis for woodland management and, unfortunately, the charred plant remains were too sparse and poorly preserved to warrant assessment.

The final discussion (Chapter 10) makes stimulating reading as it provides a very useful review of various aspects of the Middle Iron Age settlement, showing it to be similar in layout and nature to at least one of those investigated as part of the more extensive DIRFT landscape. Attention is drawn to the comparatively rare evidence for the specific distribution of various crafts on the site, particularly the bronze casting and bone/antler working, as well as weaving and probably milling. The social arrangements of these activities and the occupants of the various roundhouses is briefly considered, but recognised to be speculative, while the economic basis is clearer despite

the paucity of surviving evidence for arable agriculture. Whether the 14 crucibles and associated debris represent a 'major economic function' of the settlement throughout its 300 or so years' duration is difficult to assess. Nevertheless, this is a significant and well-recorded discovery, comparable but on a smaller scale to those at Gussage All Saints, Dorset (Wainwright 1979) and Weelsby Avenue, Grimsby (Foster 1995), though there was no associated ironworking debris at Coton Park, and no bone or iron tools used in the preparation of the moulds and finishing processes were found.

Consideration of the distribution of pottery and bone within the ring-ditches is somewhat inconclusive, but comparison of total floor areas does show an increase over time. The section on the Iron Age roundhouse in the Midlands is particularly useful (especially to one more familiar with the chalklands of Wessex), using the well preserved evidence from Brigstock, Aldwincle and Wakerley to enhance and better understand that from Coton. This also illustrates the impact that medieval and later ploughing has had in removing ephemeral remains which are important in providing information on the differing forms and construction of the roundhouses.

The penultimate sections of the final discussion draw on Andy Chapman's many years' experience reporting on Iron Age pottery assemblages in the area, following on from his predecessors, notably Dennis Jackson, and provides a current view on the typology and chronology for the period in the south Midlands. In particular he highlights the nuances in distinguishing between earlier and later Middle Iron Age pottery, with the appearance of larger storage jars towards the end of this period perhaps linked to an increased milling capacity, this in turn possibly reflecting a widespread introduction of rotary querns.

The 'Final thoughts' are pertinent reflections of the value of experience and familiarity with interpreting the archaeology and finds assemblages of local or regional landscapes, and also a plea for good quality archaeological recording both to inform post-excavation and future research.

This well produced, extensively illustrated volume provides a significant contribution to Iron Age studies in the Midlands and is also an appropriate tribute to Andy Chapman's involvement in the archaeology of the region over a long period.

References

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