The title of this book will immediately appeal to anyone with a landscape-oriented perspective on hillforts and I certainly looked forward keenly to receiving my copy for review. But a question had sprung to mind before I received it, prompted by the study’s geographical scope, as announced by its title. Why just England and Wales, a study area defined by irrelevant modern boundaries? Why not include at least Scotland, and preferably Ireland too? From the opening sentence of the Acknowledgements onwards, it becomes evident that hillforts in Wales and the Marches are Ian Brown’s great passion. Some interesting new material about these is presented and, ultimately, I was left feeling that this book should perhaps have concentrated on delivering a more focused and authoritative regional study, building on the author’s 2002 MLitt thesis. In the Acknowledgements, Brown also makes it clear that he holds Barry Cunliffe in high esteem and, with such wide geographical scope and chapters on ‘Superstition, Belief and Ritual’ and ‘Coins, Tribes, Rome and Resistance’, this book almost begins to emulate Iron Age Communities. To my mind, it loses some of its potential impact in the process.

According to the first paragraph of the Preface, this book ‘…is particularly aimed at those who have little knowledge of the subject’, but on reflection it is perhaps more successful if judged as an essentially academic contribution. The writing style aims to be light and accessible, but in places the syntax becomes rather too conversational, so that the meaning is obscured. The hillfort in the attractive cover photograph might actually take a few seconds for the non-expert to identify. The same is true in varying degrees of six out of the book’s first eight photographs: for readers who genuinely have little knowledge of the subject, these images may do more to confuse than to establish an initial clear concept of what constitutes a typical hillfort. Similarly, the text of Chapter 1 describes other authors’ definitions of hillforts and establishes that the monument class is a polythetic set, without ever actually nailing Brown’s own definition to the mast. While many of the colour photographs in the book are both attractive and informative, some of the black and white views (of Rybury in Figure 13, for example) have no place in a work aimed at non-experts. For expert and non-expert alike, it would also have been helpful to provide more maps, in what at times felt like a whirlwind journey around sites from Wales to Kent to Cumbria. The whole book contains only four maps, all hand drawn in black and white; the one that shows the distribution of hillforts along the River Wye (Figure 85), is not nearly as informative as it could be. The line drawings, showing both reconstructions and artefacts, are also perhaps less attractive than a non-expert reader might hope for.

Chapter 2, entitled ‘Great Surveys – Great Excavations’ includes one serious omission which I think deserves to be singled out. The chapter’s first two sections cover the periods 1700-1875 and 1875-1914 respectively, without mentioning that during this timespan the Ordnance Survey surveyed almost every hillfort in the book’s study area, often interpreting and depicting complex earthworks of more than one period extremely perceptively, and in the process laying the foundations of modern historic environment records (HERs). Despite the fact that historic OS map editions are now out of copyright, none of these, nor any other high-quality surveys (such as those produced by the RCHME or RCAHMW), is reproduced anywhere in the book.

Lastly, I found that the debate on defence versus symbolism (pages 190-6), which I had looked forward to as the potential climax of the ideas embodied in the book’s title, was ultimately slightly disappointing. Brown rather tentatively points to ‘…the work of Rob Liddiard (2005), [which] in questioning castles as purely military structures, looks towards a more symbolic function and the projection of power by means of architecture.’ Liddiard’s work builds upon a considerable volume of earlier scholarship on that issue and, far from being a controversial new perspective, is now approaching orthodoxy. Indeed, it might also be regarded as an emerging orthodoxy in Iron Age studies. So it would have been quite proper to use this useful analogy as the starting point for a more ambitious reappraisal of hillforts’ landscape setting and architecture. ‘Criticisms aside, this is certainly a book that anyone with an interest in the Iron Age should read.

Al Oswald
English Heritage

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