



## Book Reviews

### **THE NEOLITHIC OF BRITAIN AND IRELAND BY VICKI CUMMINGS**

*Routledge. 2017. 296pp, 81 photographs, 61 drawings, 16 maps, ISBN 978-1-138-85718-6, pb, £29.99*

When, in 1991, Julian Thomas presented his book *Rethinking the Neolithic* (Cambridge University Press) to the unsuspecting world, there were at that time arguably few works that dealt either solely or specifically with the Neolithic as a period in its own right, rather than as something largely lost within the developing sequence of British prehistory. As a consequence, although his book was designed to act as a swift intellectual kick to the posterior of prehistoric thought, bringing alternative perspectives, fresh interpretations and a whole new understanding of social theory in order to elucidate Neolithic monumental architecture, society and material culture, the absence of any comparable text meant the work swiftly became a standard textbook. This, Thomas himself later noted (in the preface to the substantially revised second edition, retitled *Understanding the Neolithic: 1999* Routledge) was somewhat of a surprise, the primary work having been produced in the belief that it was a speculative and critical piece, trying out new ideas much like a series of interconnected papers in a session at the Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference. The follow-up revision (*Understanding*) used the first edition (*Rethinking*) as a springboard to further explore key themes, albeit in a more structured way, being less a second edition than an exercise in demystification and clarity. Looking back, it is clear that Thomas' book(s) lit the academic touch-paper, subsequently igniting multiple Neolithic-specific works focusing on all aspects of the period, attempting to introduce alternative ways of interrogating the dataset and trying to see the past from the regional to the spiritual via the psychological, artefactual, metaphysical and phenomenological.

Today, there are so many books covering the period from the advent of farming and monument building to the arrival of Beakers and metals, that one may, with some justification, ask whether there is any need for more? In the context of other archaeological or historical periods, especially those relating to the Romano-British interlude or the 16th- and 17th-century 'Tudorbethan' era, there is a curious sense of authorial self-flagellation, whereby writers feel the need to abase themselves before the great reading public in order to apologise for introducing 'yet another book' to the ever-increasing pile. This has always struck me as strange, for there is, in any period of the human past, always some new angle to explore, some more evidence to examine and something new to say.

The ability to add something new to a seemingly well-worn debate is nowhere more apparent than when assessing the material evidence for Neolithic Britain. Since the dawn of the

millennium, there have been a host of significant archaeological discoveries, most brought to light during fieldwork conducted in advance of new infrastructure projects, and scientific revelations, most notably the overhaul of chronology and phasing brought about in the wake of Alasdair Whittle, Frances Healy and Alex Bayliss' seminal work *Gathering Time Project* (published in two volumes by Oxbow Books in 2011 as *Gathering Time: Dating the Early Neolithic Enclosures of Southern Britain and Ireland*). Here, the Bayesian-derived approach to modelling radiocarbon chronologies, permitting significant refinement of general, and often centuries-long swathes of time, to more subtle identifications of specific generational timespans, revolutionised our understanding of the Neolithic. The impact of this study has moved beyond a simple clarification of the form, design and development of causewayed enclosures and continues to have impact on all aspects of prehistory today.

Vicki Cummings, Professor of Neolithic Archaeology at the University of Central Lancashire, is an ideal choice to author a new survey of the state-of-play concerning Neolithic Britain and Ireland, marshalling diverse forms of evidence to better define, describe, interpret and present a model of post hunter-gatherer society in this ever-shifting world of archaeological redefinition and chronological refinement. Having worked extensively on sites that border the Irish Sea, together with the prehistoric landscapes of central Ireland and northern Scotland, Cummings approaches the Neolithic dataset with a view not only to understanding, but also to shifting the emphasis of study away from Wessex, where both fieldwork and monument focus have dominated, in order to include all parts of the British Isles. This is not the first time that such a geographical switch has been attempted, of course, although the dominance of Wessex in both the archaeological literature and the minds of the reading public have usually, and somewhat inevitably, resulted in research attention eventually gravitating back to a more overtly Central Southern English chalkscape.

Cummings' book appears, at first glance, a rather conventional take on the British Neolithic, from its simple title (with no complicated sub-headings), to its undramatic (and rather uninspiring) cover photo, most of which is obscured by writing, to the wrap-around colour brand, using exactly the same shade of dark crimson deployed for Julian Thomas' 1999 *Understanding the Neolithic* (also by Routledge), perhaps to engender a sense of familiarity. The chapter listing, developing themes from the Late Mesolithic to the Neolithic transition, to mortuary practice and monumentality in the Early Neolithic, circles and lines, lines and landscapes of descent, late Neolithic mortuary practice and eventually to the arrival of Beakers, gives nothing away. A quick flick through the tome identifies the usual, reliable crop of key site location maps, individual site plans and artefact drawings, interspersed with dramatic black and white photographs of major monument forms and landscapes as they exist today. So far so normal.

Don't be deceived by the rather downbeat in-house style of the publisher, however, for the text that develops within successfully weaves together a comprehensive mass of primary source

material, meshing it seamlessly with a host of new archaeological discoveries together with a veritable battery of scientific analysis and research. This is so much more than just simple review of a well-known prehistoric dataset; it is a masterclass in clear thinking and innovative interpretation. The first two chapters, outlining the later Mesolithic background and the transition to a more recognisably farming and monument building lifestyle, analyses the complex nature of the social, economic and political changes surrounding the Neolithic package, using the newly revised chronology developed during the Gathering Time project (and after) to demonstrate just how rapid and widespread the revolution really was. Back in the 1980s and early 90s, students were taught that using migration and invasion in order to explain change in prehistory was not just wrong, but potentially extremely dangerous. There was, in both in the lecture theatre and on the printed page, no such thing as a 'Neolithic Revolution' in the true sense of the term, only a gradual process of acculturation and change affecting a relatively stable, albeit trade-obsessed, hunter-gatherer population, who came to see the benefits of farming. Nor was there anything resembling the idea of a 'Beaker People', the term 'Beaker-using-people' ideally also being avoided if at all possible. The invasion/migration/rapid change hypothesis was, of course, extremely popular in the late 19th and early 20th century, with archaeological maps, showing the distribution of Neolithic and Chalcolithic artefacts across Europe, looking in hindsight as if they were identifying the residue of a carefully planned military advance. Now that the fall-out of the Gathering Time Project has started to settle, suggestions that both the Neolithic and Beaker packages were part of a series of swift, possibly even generational, changes in society triggered by migration, has started to rip up the rather complacent nature of late 20th-century prehistoric archaeological discourse.

Cummings' book sifts through the residue of the radiocarbon recalibration, assessing its impact upon both the establishment of monumental architecture and the advent of a new material culture in a thoughtful, intelligent and extremely engaging and comprehensible way. Chapters develop ideas sensibly, introducing famous and less well-known sites and bringing in alternative ways of assessing the significance and meaning of Neolithic constructs as well as the social context within which they came into being with mortuary practice, in particular developing as a major theme. Two final chapters introduce the arrival of Beakers, copper and bronze and consider what we have learnt, outlining the gaps in our knowledge and the future directions that archaeological research may take. In all instances, as already noted, the expansion of geographical focus away from well-worn landscapes of Wessex is particularly welcome.

One point, and it is an extremely minor one, is that it is a shame that the well-chosen drawings that permeate the text have not been redrawn to a single house-style; many appearing as they were originally depicted in papers, books and conference proceedings. The redrawing of figures would certainly have provided an additional sense of consistency and coherency to the dataset and to Cummings' arguments as they developed. Presenting site plans and artefact drawings

they first appeared in print, although undoubtedly saving time and money in the compilation of a book, unfortunately creates the sense of a source material mash-up, distinctive and very different styles of graphic frequently sitting together on the page in an occasionally rather uncomfortable way.

Whereas some books which claim to detail aspects of the British or wider European Neolithic have, in the recent past, summarised and interpreted the period in an overtly old-school way, failing on almost every level to engage, enthuse or stimulate with their exhaustive catalogue of sites, listing one after another with little or no insight or interpretative skill, Cummings' take on the Mesolithic, Neolithic and Chalcolithic presents a clear introduction to the non-specialist and expert reader alike, providing a concise summary and overview of key places and excavation results, whilst touching on the major questions that permeate the on-going and dynamic nature of research. Evidence is presented, arguments drawn and conclusions authoritatively structured. Like Thomas' *Rethinking the Neolithic*, Cummings' book will, I have no doubt, become an invaluable textbook for the expert, teacher, researcher, student and general interest reader. I just hope that Routledge improve upon the presentation when the inevitable second edition comes to press.

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*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor*