Book Review

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON NEOLITHIC PIT DEPOSITION: BEYOND THE MUNDANE, EDITED BY HUGO ANDERSON-WHYMARK AND JULIAN THOMAS


That Neolithic people buried material in pits in meaningful ways is now well-known, especially through the work of Julian Thomas (1999) and Duncan Garrow (2007), whose contributions considering the history, current state and future prospects of pit studies in Britain and Ireland book-end this impressive collection of papers. The present interest in pits is largely a result of their work but, as Thomas notes in his introductory chapter, the majority of such features which lack significant assemblages are still rarely discussed in detail (p2). In part this may be because the concept of ‘structured deposition’, which Thomas himself helped introduce to archaeological interpretation, has led to those features with assemblages which seem to fit the bill of selection and placement being privileged over the others. However, when one takes all types of Neolithic pit seriously, as the contributors do here, that difference begins to dissolve; indeed at the end of the volume Garrow notes that ‘structured deposition’ may now be the least well understood aspect of Neolithic pits (p223). Rather than a binary distinction between structured/ritual and mundane deposits, there is a continuum of practice between pits with apparently random deposits of domestic ‘rubbish’ and those with carefully placed items. In the middle are features like those in western Scotland described by Alastair Becket and Gavin MacGregor, which lack order in their filling but reveal recurrent combinations of materials.

It is the quantities of data now available that mean more sophisticated interpretations are required. The volume makes it abundantly clear just how widespread the pit phenomenon is across Neolithic Britain and Ireland, and is testimony to the value of synthesis of development-led fieldwork. But while the avowed aim is to look at regional variation in this practice – and the contributors indeed do their best to stress difference – the impression given, to this reader at least, is one of considerable consistency in practice over time and space. For example, with reference to the Isle of Man, Darvill notes several points that could apply to most other regions, including the possible Mesolithic origins of pit-digging, the trend towards more formal arrangements in the later Neolithic and the recurrent use of many sites and sometimes even individual features (pp36-8). Thomas suggests that large arrangements of pits are typical of East Anglia (p4), but other contributors show that while small sites predominate in many areas, including South Wales and the Wye-Severn region, clusters of similar size to Hurst Fen and Kilverstone are widespread across Britain, e.g. over 200 pits at Thirlings in Northumberland (p79), around 100 at Meadowend Farm, Clackmannanshire (p71), and more than 100 at Wellington Quarry in Herefordshire (p147). And while Hugo Anderson-Whymark notes ‘subtle regional differences’ in the Thames Valley pits and their contents (p191), close reading of the other papers suggests none of the characteristics he sets out are unique to this area. For example, the evidence for rapid backfilling is seen as far afield as western Scotland (p58), Northumberland (p84) and Norfolk (p112). While there is indeed considerable variability in pit deposits, we appear to see much the same kind of variation within each region. Across the country people drew selectively on a shared pit ‘vocabulary’; what Gareth Chaffey and Elina Brook term the ‘consistent patterns of domesticity’ (p213) or Becket and MacGregor ‘a network of shared knowledge representative of a wide-spread community’ (p61).

So how does interpretation move beyond the problematic concept of structured deposition? Thomas and Ray both suggest that the idea of ‘presencing’ (how traces of specific people were embedded in particular locations) might be one way of unpacking variability in these features and making sense of patterning at different scales, while Tim Darvill looks further afield to draw on Greek myth as evidence for the chthonic and acoustic properties of pits. Ffion Reynolds looks to ethnography to interpret the Coneybury Anomaly in terms of feasting, totemism and taboo, though the unique contents of this pit compared to the other features described in the volume, especially the quantity of faunal remains, means the argument resists generalisation. Most of the authors simply emphasise the complexity of practice and the need for better contextual understanding.
Although interpretation is sometimes deferred, many of the papers pose interesting questions for further research. Diana Cole’s paper on deposition at settlements in Orkney reminds us what we might be missing in terms of architectural evidence elsewhere. However, there may be other ways of getting at this: Chaffey and Brook interpret the area surrounded by pits at Horton, Berkshire, as a ‘house void’ where a structure once stood, broadly contemporary with the well-preserved building at the same site; and even though Ben Edwards shows that the various pits and post-holes at Thirlings in Northumberland could not themselves have been structural, it is tempting to see some of the L- and C-shaped arrangements of pits as potentially enclosing buildings. Such arrangements are also found on smaller sites, as at Cwmifor in Wales (p137), discussed by Amelia Pannett, though elsewhere a simpler arrangement of paired pits often seems to be evident, as at some of the Severn-Wye and Thames Valley sites considered respectively by Robin Jackson and Keith Ray and by Anderson-Whymark.

A related question concerns the extent of erosion on these sites, which is often assumed to be substantial and to have removed evidence of less substantial features. However, Roy Loveday and Matt Beamish’s pit sites at Aston and Willington in the Trent Valley, although sealed by a later monument and alluvial deposits respectively, lack associated structural remains beyond the hints of oven-like superstructures for the features themselves. If buildings are not apparent even on minimally truncated sites then it seems pits are not just the surviving components of Neolithic settlement; they were the major structural component of settlements.

In this role, however, they present something of a paradox, which the volume does not entirely solve. While individual pits usually seem to be short-lived features, and the same may go for entire clusters (Emilie Sibbesson compares the duration of the pit site at Kilverstone in Norfolk with the much longer chronology of the pottery manufacturing tradition represented there), they may nonetheless connote or incorporate much longer timescales. As Kenneth Noble and Gordon Brophy argue, pits are often dug on ‘important ground’ (p74), returned to much later for further pit digging or the construction of monuments. Others may contain ancient, curated artefacts, such as the Peterborough Ware incorporated into Grooved Ware pits at Kings Stanley (p157) and Horton (p210). How long features were open and/or visible requires further work, which – as ever – would be aided by more dates. Rare direct evidence of duration is reported by Jessica Smyth in relation to a pit in Co. Derry for which Bayesian modelling of radiocarbon dates has suggested a fill process taking up to 50 years.

Alongside further consideration of temporality, there would appear to be scope for more work on the condition of pit assemblages. The selection of material implies, as Thomas notes (pp8-9), a ‘pre-pit context’ where material accumulated prior to deposition. While the common presence of worn, broken, processed and burnt material is frequently noted, there is little reference to the broader field of fragmentation studies (e.g. Chapman and Gaydarska 2007). Only Edwards attempts a quantitative analysis, suggesting that at Thirlings potsherds were selected for deposition on the basis of their size. This kind of detailed work is probably necessary if we are to move from simply saying that pits record ‘the intricacy of local cultural identities’ (p159) to teasing out the details of a site or regional narrative.

This volume succeeds in demonstrating the huge potential for studying pits, especially now data-sets are large enough to allow synthesis and comparison of sites within a region. Indeed, the British Neolithic can no longer be adequately discussed without reference to pits. However, that very ubiquity leaves the problem of how to incorporate these small-scale features into larger-scale narratives, aspects of which are framed by several contributors: how do we make sense of isolated pits without an adequate framework for their contextualisation (p69); how do we focus on repeated practice, rather than the unusual and individual, without subsuming variability (pp78-9); how can we understand the dynamics of pit deposition in a landscape context (p10) and use them to inform wider patterns of occupation and movement (p197)? The papers collected here will undoubtedly provide the impetus to explore such questions for years to come.

References


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