THE BRONZE AGE IN THE SEVERN ESTUARY BY MARTIN BELL


Although headed by Martin Bell, this excellent volume contains contributions by no fewer than 23 individual specialists. The Bronze Age in the Severn Estuary describes the excavations and surveys on the Severn estuary wetlands over the last 20 years and, as might be expected from the main author’s specialism, deals extensively with, indeed maximises, the environmental resource. It starts with an introduction to the Severn Estuary in terms of past research and geology and provides an extremely useful chronological chart (Fig 1.3) showing both how the various sites described here relate to one another as well as to their wider national significance. The sites of Redwick and Cold Harbour Pill form the first section and the unusual Bronze Age rectangular timber structures at Redwick are described in detail. Despite the waterlogged nature of the environment and the preservation of wood, there are still uncertainties as to their reconstructions and these are clearly explained by the principal author. The buildings provided evidence of woodworking, different wood species, material for tree-ring studies and dendrochronological dating, although application of the last-named technique proved disappointing. Sections on botanical data insect and larger faunal remains are all dealt with in considerable detail as are the associated footprints, attributed to both adults and children as well as to cattle, sheep, pig, horse and deer. The human prints in particular remind us that archaeology is the study of real people and not abstract populations. Artefacts are few. These datasets are brought together by Bell in an overview of the occupation of the site. Again it is clear and well-written. Radiocarbon dates indicate that the main occupation was between 1500-1000 cal BC but that the use of the individual buildings was much shorter. The identification of Ewart Park type blades on the wood may suggest that it was towards the end of this time-range. The rectangular structures may have been occupied by both humans and livestock and though Bell valiantly searches for British parallels for the Redwick structures, no directly comparable sites can as yet be found and it is in the Netherlands and the western continental mainland that the best parallels may be located. Interestingly, as here, the Dutch wattle-constructed longhouses have been interpreted as seasonally occupied. The occupiers of the Severn Estuary structures (perhaps women and children supervising grazing cattle and processing dairy products) appear to have been chiefly pastoralists relying mainly on cattle and exploiting the rich spring and summer grazing that the wetlands had to offer. Cereal evidence, however, points to an element of dry land cultivation and a mixed economy.

Section II deals with the Peterstone Palaeochannels which, though lacking the same structural details as Redwick, have also produced considerable Bronze Age artefactual and environmental data. A wooden post alignment, fashioned using stone axes, dates to the Late Neolithic whilst ceramics date as early as Beaker and extend into the Bronze Age. The haft for a flanged axe or palstave is a fascinating find and a bone polisher? made possibly from an auroch’s sternum must represent more evidence for the late (if rare) survival of the species. A poleaxed and butchered bovid cranium reinforces the emphasis on pastoralism already observed at Redwick, however, given the range of other animal bones from the excavations it is concluded that both wild and domestic animals were ‘killed, processed and eaten’ (p250). The data, including the stable isotope data from the animal bone, suggests that saltmarsh grazing was being exploited.
Section III places the research within its wider setting with particular reference to contemporary environments. Brown’s study of the pollen evidence, for example, ranges well in land to the southern Welsh uplands, the Cotswolds and Mendip and the uplands of Exmoor and notes considerable deforestation in all areas in the Middle Bronze Age. Martin Bell extends this to an overview of the Bronze Age generally in the wider region well illustrated by hypothetical agricultural calendars and landscape transect diagrams. Bell sees the Estuary as a unifying rather than dividing feature for adjacent coastal areas of England and south Wales. He points out the distribution in this area of Trevisker Ware pottery and South Wales/Stogursey socketed axes suggesting regional connections and the exploitation of maritime/estuarine routes.

The volume concludes with comparison of British coastal wetlands. It is a pity that this is mainly English-focussed for whilst sites in Scotland receive mention, they do not appear on the distribution maps. Discussion of shell middens, the increasing evidence for Hebridean submerged Neolithic settlements and the ecology of the islands of Orkney and Shetland would have made this study truly British. This said, this volume represents a masterpiece of palaeoenvironmental study exploiting each strand of evidence to the full and weaving a complex tapestry of life in the south west of this island some four to three thousand years ago. Bell and his team are to be congratulated.

Alex Gibson
University of Bradford

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