



## Book Reviews

### **THE LIFE AND DEATH OF QUERNS: THE DEPOSITION AND USE-CONTEXTS OF QUERNS IN SOUTH-WESTERN ENGLAND FROM THE NEOLITHIC TO THE IRON AGE BY SR WATTS**

*Southampton Monographs in Archaeology, New Series No 3, The Highfield Press, Southampton, 2014. 189pp, 64 illus incl 43 col plates, 3 appendices, 16 tables, ISBN 978-0-9926336-1-5, pb, £20*

This generally well-produced and illustrated book in the Southampton Monographs in Archaeology Series presents the results of the author's PhD thesis on the structured deposition of querns within the south-west of England in a fairly readable and easy to reference style.

The introductory chapter deals with the theoretical concept of structured deposition, the nature of the depositional processes, and the appropriateness of querns to this study, following which a useful review is provided of the British literature on quern archaeology ranging from the seminal work by Curwen on The Trundle (1929), to Buckley's *Querns in Ritual Context* (1993), Heslop's *Patterns of Quern Production, Acquisition and Deposition* (2008) and Brück, who considers querns 'as potent symbols of life, fertility and productivity...burnt, broken and buried at death'(2006). A slightly different view of the symbolic significance of fragmentation of querns is provided by Chapman (2000) who describes the breakage and dispersal of pieces as representing an enchainment that links people and places. The chapter finishes with a discussion followed by an outline of the research objectives and methodology of the study; the latter introducing the study area, the task of collating data, plus a definition of dating parameters etc.

Chapter Two examines the early chronological development of the quern from the origins of the saddle quern in the Levant around 13,000 years BP, to its arrival in Britain sometime during the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, the latter developing from saucer or bowl-shaped querns in the Neolithic, to trough querns in the Bronze Age, and then smaller, flatter querns and rubber stones by the Iron Age. These were gradually ousted by the rotary quern which arrived in Britain around 400BC, this taking the form of one or two-handled beehive types which become commonplace during the later Iron Age in Southern Britain (though some of these may actually have been turned using an oscillatory rather than fully rotational motion).

The object biography of querns (Chapter 3) is amongst the most interesting I have read. In this the rationale for change was examined. A saddle quern was easier and quicker to fashion for personal use (most likely by women given the ethnographic evidence), whereas rotary querns which could grind 3-4kg rather than 0.6kg of wheat an hour, involved specialist extraction and manufacture. Yet the initial adoption of these querns may simply have been a desire to possess new technology. Other aspects to consider include those limitations on the procurement of raw material (ie, abrasiveness, hardness of rock and distance to source), the tools required in their manufacture, the numbers of querns and their different uses within the household. In addition

there are the products of grinding (from wheat flour to pottery temper) and processes of transformation (milling to brewing), the action of maintenance and preservation, the secondary function and re-use of querns (such as ranging from moulds to paving slabs), the trade of stones, and finally their discard and deposition within the archaeological record.

The symbolic properties of querns (Chapter 4) looks at what may lie behind the various types of structured deposition and examples are provided in the succeeding chapters. Querns are examined as symbols of gender and sexuality (traditionally the terms for parts are anthropomorphic, ie, eye, skirt, breast, damsel etc.), of feasting, of death and atonement (the tale of John Barleycorn echoing perhaps the prehistoric legend of Mot and Baal), of transformation (the act of milling being both destructive and creative), of the movement of the sun and heavens (the turning of the world), of association with colour and decoration, or as parts of the body of the house (theories relating to the position of these objects within the Bronze Age or Iron Age roundhouse), and finally the significance of the burial of conjoined pairs, single but still useable (upper or lower) stones, or else completely destroyed querns in the form of fragments.

The study of Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age quern finds within the sample area begins with a broad overview of these and their structured contexts (Chapter 5). This is useful as it provides a good background to the overall distribution as well as the absences of finds, the evidence for which is supported by maps (of Cornwall, Devon and Somerset) and graphs. Details of the dataset of the study are provided: 990 querns (1200 including 'unstructured' finds) from 104 different sites, the largest number being from Meare Lake Village (199) and Cadbury Castle (129) in Somerset. Just 12 of these sites were Neolithic, 47 were Bronze Age, the rest being Iron Age (64). From these collectively 311 saddle querns, 352 rubbers and 140 rotary querns were recovered.

Each of the following three chapters begins with a relevant summary of the changes taking place in the south-west in terms of settlement archaeology and environment from the Mesolithic to Neolithic, Neolithic to Bronze Age, and Bronze Age to Iron Age. Also provided is an assessment of the agriculture, particularly that of cereal cultivation and other edible crops. Thus for the Neolithic (Chapter 6) the settled nomadism followed by a cereal cultivation decline in the Later Neolithic may well be relevant to the eventually reduced numbers of quern (fragments) that we find (ie, just one recognisable Late Neolithic saddle quern was recovered from Tremough Farm in Cornwall). A study of the various contexts of deposition follows. Thus for the Early Neolithic we find quern fragments deposited within pits, but also some rare placed examples of whole querns. The practice of leaving these *in situ*, it was suggested, might be typical of semi-nomadic communities who leave or bury these less portable items, taking just the rubbing stones with them. Deliberate fragmentation and the deposition of either upper or lower stone was commonplace, as was the closure of deposits; structural deposition of these, as other items, seeming to be part of the 'Neolithic package'.

The shift from mobile communities cultivating crops in the nomadic style to that of permanent farming (with settlements and field systems in the moorland areas) is characteristic of the south-western Bronze Age, yet we don't really see an increase in quern deposition at this time, but rather the opposite (Chapter 7). However, we do see querns being deposited during the decommissioning of settlement structures, a phenomenon more typical of the Middle-Late Bronze Age. Almost all of the stone used appears to be local to the south-west, most of it from

sources less than 10km distant. Although the milling of wheat appears to be the norm, the crushing of mineral, or perhaps the recovery of tin or copper prills formed during smelting (though there is no evidence for this) could be linked to querns found at the metalworking site of Sigwells, at Shaugh Moor on Dartmoor, and at Cadbury Castle in Somerset. Likewise the querns found at Gwithian (West Cornwall) could have been used for grinding temper in the production of pottery. Nevertheless more than 60% of Bronze Age quern appears to have come from roundhouses or other structures, some of it associated with stone walls or postholes, including the so-called 'foundation deposits' that were found at Trethellan Farm in Cornwall.

Chapter 8 documents how quern deposition during the Iron Age in South-West England post-600 BC was influenced by the appearance and expansion of the hillforts (significant numbers of querns being recovered from Cadbury and Ham Hill), the existence of the Meare and Glastonbury Lake Villages, whilst in West Cornwall querns are associated with small stone-built settlements (courtyard houses) some of which include fogous. An increase in quern deposition at this time might relate to a rise in cereal production, whilst the deposition of larger amounts of fragmented saddle quern (in the Middle Iron Age) could be linked to disposal following the introduction of the rotary quern, the result being an overall decline in saddle quern during the Late Iron Age. Specific contexts that we find being used for the burial of querns include disused grain storage pits on hillforts, the walls and floors of roundhouses and clay mounds in lake villages, postholes, gullies, hearths and kilns, fogous, middens, ramparts and ditches, human burials, quern quarries (quern present as unfinished blanks), caves and craftworking deposits (which include metalworking workshops such as those found at Glastonbury, Cadbury Castle in Somerset and Chun Castle in West Cornwall).

The final chapter in the book presents the summary discussion and conclusions. Here some of the best examples of structured deposition are reiterated, examples from the south-west being compared with those from the rest of Britain. One of the issues discussed here was the commonality of structured deposition across the European Neolithic, another being the use of wear analysis to determine the nature of milled materials, and finally the subject of deliberate fragmentation as part of disposal. In conclusion, 14 different types of structured deposit containing quern stone were identified across the Neolithic-Iron Age of the south-west.

The appendices include tables of the main sites database for the south-west. This includes the numbers of querns found within structured contexts (Appendix 1), a table showing additional find spots with the type and date of quern found (Appendix 2), and finally another 12 tables give details of the querns and associated artefacts found within postholes, pits, ditches, funerary and other contexts for the Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age (Appendix 3). All of these tables are sufficiently clear and easy enough to reference, as is the comprehensive and complete bibliography, alongside a very useful combined subject and place-name index.

Overall the book scores well on its production, with good print quality and in particular good editing, with no typos, punctuation or text justification issues noted. The organisation and hierarchy of headings is clear, yet the body of the text still resembles the sort of arrangement one might expect to see within a PhD. Nevertheless the book is very well referenced (most references include page numbers), and this contributes to the overall impression of a well-researched, widely-sourced piece of work. In general the quality of most of the photographic and drawn figures is good.

So how does this book advance scholarship in the field of quern studies? There is no doubt in my mind that some of the examples referred to will be quoted within a wide range of future works, not only on querns, but also on the subject of material culture significance, structured deposition, and needless to say, the prehistory of South-West England. In fact the liberal use of modern ethnographic evidence and historical folk documentation to help understand the communal and practical use of querns, their gender symbolism, and continuance of myth is an important contribution in itself, as are the limited references to experimental archaeological studies of quern use and manufacture. Either way there is much food for thought here as regards the possible interpretations of structured deposition, not all of which I agree with as the most credible of explanations (such as the suggestion that quern stone may have been placed within walls of houses to enable ‘the transference of...powers and properties to the building or to (its) occupants’ (p.80)), but most of which furthers our knowledge in this subject.

What can we say about omissions? It would have been good to have seen a little more on the geology (lithology) of quern stones, in particular the documentation of quarry sites and sources of stone used in the south-west. Whilst procurement is not strictly speaking deposition (except at the quarry sites where fragments from quarrying and production are deposited along with unfinished or broken blanks), extraction and manufacture remain an important part of the object biography of a quern. To name just a few sources, we know that quern was being extracted from the Permian trap lava outcrops around Exeter as well as from the Old Red Sandstone quartz conglomerates and sandstones of the Mendips (Priddy, Shipham, Beacon Hill and Wells) and the Bristol-Portishead area. This production began in the Early-Middle Iron Age and then carried on through the Late Iron Age into the Roman period (Shaffrey 2006), some of the Late Iron Age querns ending up at sites like Ham Hill. In fact much more quern has been found at Ham Hill during excavations recently carried out on the hillfort by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) and Cardiff University than has been indicated in this book.

Although the options of utilitarian deposition (ie, simple discard) of worn and recycled quern stone is discussed in this book, the possibility that this state of affairs was the norm, and that symbolically significant structured deposition was the exception, isn’t. This is a very big issue I think in our interpretation of prehistory, and one that is not always adequately or critically addressed in the literature. This is one issue we can discuss for ages I think, yet it is usually the more fashionable, interesting, and ‘sexiest’ explanations which prevail in written work. Indeed, it is partly that which attracts people to prehistoric archaeology, and there is no doubt of course that it *is* interesting! But is the reality different?

Looking at some of the Bronze Age-Iron Age quern stone recently recovered from archaeological sites in Cambridgeshire and Eastern England (some of which ends up on my desk), most is burnt, fragmentary, but more importantly frequently mixed-up with burnt cooking stone. This is particularly the case with Early-Middle Iron Age sites where much of the broken-up worn quern has been re-used as ‘pot boilers’ alongside sandstone cobbles collected from the gravels. At the site of Barleycroft in Cambridgeshire (Evans & Tabor 2012) up to 22% of the burnt stone recovered from rubbish pits was found to consist of re-used fragmentary saddle quern. In this case recycling followed by a relatively disordered discard of material appears to be the dominant practice.

However, amongst all this we occasionally find some really interesting (but enigmatic) examples of intentional deposition. Recently a pair of Hunsbury-type Late Iron Age querns was recovered from the bottom of a palaeo-channel at Willington in Bedfordshire, both still joined by the iron axle and sleeve, with 2-way wooden handle surviving in the upper stone (similar to the Silchester example shown in Fig.2.6, p.21 of this book). The most likely explanation for its presence here being that this relatively little-used intact hand mill was carefully dropped into the channel off the side of the boat, in a similar context perhaps to that recorded from the Glastonbury Lake Village (p.120).

Despite my own doubts concerning any universal explanations for the practice of deposition and disposal of querns, I found this book stimulating to read, and I think a very useful addition to the bookshelf for anyone interested in quern stone, prehistoric craftworking, and the archaeology of the south-west.

A final word. If you know your Iron Age querns, and have used a rotary hand mill, then you will certainly understand the meaning behind this old Gaelic riddle (p.46) 'an old woman in the corner, spokes through her two eyes, and she is grumbling'. Happy reading.

### **References**

Evans, C, & Tabor, J, 2012. *Excavations at Barleycroft Farm 2012*, Cambridge Archaeological Unit Report no.1104, University of Cambridge

Shaffrey, R, 2006. Grinding and Milling: A study of Romano-British rotary querns and millstones made from Old Red Sandstone, *BAR British Series no.409*

*Simon Timberlake,*

*Cambridge Archaeological Unit,*

*University of Cambridge*

Review received: July 2014

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