



Book Reviews

CULT, RELIGION AND PILGRIMAGE ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT THE NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE MONUMENT COMPLEX OF THORNBOROUGH, NORTH YORKSHIRE BY J HARDING

CBA Research Report 174, 2013. 236 pp, 155 figs with 29 col plates (59 figs in digital appendices), 11 tables (32 tables in digital appendices), ISBN 978-1-902771-97-7, pb, £25

This impressive Research Report took me, enthralled, down memory lane. I had been one of a happy band of undergraduates at Oxford University who dug at Dorchester-on-Thames (Oxfordshire) under the inspired leadership of Richard Atkinson in the late 1940s. I maintained my links with Dorchester and Atkinson by sharing directorship of an excavation of the major henge monument there, Big Rings, Site XIII, with an underlying ring-ditch containing a possible timber building, Site XIV (Whittle et al 1992). The Big Rings, its bank between two ditches and opposed entrances, class IIA in Atkinson's classification, had no obvious analogy in southern England. Arminghall (Norfolk; Clark 1936) is double-ditched, to be sure; but with single entrance and a timber structure within, it was obviously different. Condicote (Gloucestershire), a double-ditched possible henge monument, was almost unknown at that time and its full character has yet to be established (Saville 1983). But we knew of the existence of three close-spaced henge monuments to the north of Ripon in north-east Yorkshire, the Thornborough Circles, which appeared to be identical if a little larger. The Yorkshire sites invited our attention.

The Big Rings (with a spectacular Beaker burial positioned outside its northern entrance, Site XII) had also produced Beaker sherds in a primary position in one butt-end of the inner ditch at its southern entrance and it seemed reasonable therefore to attempt a restricted examination of one of the Thornborough Circles to see if all these henges were similar in period and culture. This is what led your reviewer to the central Circle at Thornborough in 1952, with a group of fellow students from the University of London Institute of Archaeology, to excavate the inner ditch at its southern entrance, in exactly the same location as our own main cutting at the Big Rings in the hope – fruitless as it turned out – that it might yield similar deposits (Thomas 1955). By curious coincidence a fellow Guernsey man (the Revd W C Lukis FSA died 1882, a local vicar), had opened barrows within the complex (Lukis 1870) and one of the contributors to Harding's Thornborough project, Heather Sebire FSA, is married to a Guernsey man and has worked in the museum there.

The Thornborough Circles are situated between the Vale of Mowbray to the east and the Pennines westward, some 10km north of Ripon. With three other henges between them and Ripon, they are all significantly located between the Rivers Ure and Swale, on a shelf of Permian limestone. For many years the Circles have been threatened by mineral extraction, whose recent development has impinged upon the central and northern Circles and destroyed almost half of a cursus which underlies the former. This deplorable disregard for the most substantial assemblage of sacred and burial sites in the UK outside Salisbury Plain has led the universities of Newcastle and Reading to conduct a ten-year campaign (1994-2004) employing a variety of the latest field techniques and limited excavation to record and analyse what is there and replace obscurity by what we can now recognise as the outstanding importance of the Thornborough complex. The project has been directed by Jan Harding of the University of Newcastle and the results are now

presented to us in this masterly publication. He is at pains to emphasise that his work combined results from the Vale of Mowbray Neolithic Landscape Project (1994-1999) and a project funded by the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund (2002-2004).

Harding's campaign has established the greater part of what constitutes this amazing centre of religiosity and human endeavour. First, the three massive Circles, the central one overlying a cursus. Then, a triple-ditched barrow for burial and other activities, a barrow cemetery, an oval enclosure, a double pit alignment associated with a barrow and a ring-ditch, a second possible cursus, another double pit alignment and two single pit rows. Scoops for extracting gypsum may be contemporary. Three more henges lie a little to the south, Nunwick, Hutton Moor and Cana Barn; all six sites apparently aligned with the Devil's Arrows, a row of three enormous blocks of Millstone Grit situated just south-east of Ripon. This is an inventory of the more obvious monuments and crop mark sites which Harding describes.

Geophysical survey made it clear, however, that the Thornborough henges and underlying cursus are full of timber and other more ephemeral features which established that in its heyday, to be spread over more than 1000 years, this Yorkshire complex was alive with human activity. It included the making and re-making of a range of modest structures in wood and pebbles, evidently considered essential to whatever was going on around it.

As a record, one of most important – and fascinating – aspects of this Report is the variety of techniques which Harding and his team have employed to wrinkle out the prehistory of Thornborough. Relatively straightforward was excavation, limited in scope but carried out by practitioners with admirable skill. Their total excavation and report of the double pit alignment beside the southern Thornborough henge and the presentation of what they found is a model of its kind. Throughout the research of the complex we are shown how maximum use has been made of a combination of aerial photography, geophysical survey, fieldwalking with test pitting and superb analysis of what has emerged. In the Report, wherever appropriate, colour and two-tone effects have been used to enhance the clarity of what is a complex and sometimes unbelievable story. Here the greatest credit must go to the designers and publishers for the quality of their presentation. Life for the reader has been made so much easier and enjoyable when, for example, a figure illustrating a survey of the land containing the Central and Southern Circles is enhanced by the use of colour to emphasise the height of their banks. Employment of a multi-coloured landform model of the Thornborough landscape (courtesy of English Heritage) when presenting hypothetical foci of Mesolithic, or earlier and later Neolithic and Bronze Age activities is a revelation in a way in which no other publishing technique could be.

For this reviewer, perhaps the most astonishing aspect of Harding's archaeology was the gathering and analysis of lithics collected through widespread fieldwalking over 57 carefully selected fields located around the three henges. Here, as Harding acknowledges, a lead was taken from recent work on lithic scatters in southern England, notably around Stonehenge and in Cranborne Chase. Impressive expertise has gone to establish the typological range of the lithics encountered at Thornborough so that during various phases of the complex it has been possible to see how people settled in different places at various times during the use of the monuments. And how extraordinary, too, to learn that in certain locations at odd times one colour of flint was preferred to another. Such detail could only emerge through the most exacting standards of fieldwalking, recording and analysis. Moreover, such work has thrown valuable new light on the sources of flint and stone found at the complex, giving us a clearer understanding of the movement of such materials between the Yorkshire coast and the Pennines.

As an essential preliminary to Harding's final consideration of the meaning and uses of the Thornborough complex, he has made much of his discovery that pits were dug for the extraction

of gypsum apparently as part of metaphysical needs here. This soft white calcium sulphate occurs in a band of Permian rock extending from Catterick to the south of Doncaster. Underground, its solution can result in caves whose occasional collapse leads to subsidence and then the appearance of pits or sinkholes appears on the surface, sometimes quite suddenly. These may have alerted the ancient inhabitants to the presence of the material and its accessibility by pit-digging. In whatever way its production was achieved, Harding has tested and accepted the conclusion which we drew in 1952 from our own discovery of notable quantities of re-deposited gypsum within the make-up of the bank of the Central Circle: the earthwork must have been deliberately whitened by a coating of the stuff (Cornwall in Thomas 1955). Regarded with suspicion until relatively recently, trial excavation as part of Harding's limited work at the other two Thornborough Circles has confirmed the probable use of gypsum as a whitener at all three circles.

This intriguing confirmation of the use of gypsum at the complex (deposits of it were noted at the triple ditch barrow and by Lukis in the barrow cemetery) becomes of importance to Harding in his more hypothetical considerations concerning the roles of water (the local rivers), the underworld (gypsum and sudden soil movement), sun, moon and the overworld (attention to alignments) in this amazing place, "a landscape whose air was thick with religion". Final sections of the Report give valued insights into the precise layouts of most of the sites in the complex. A good case is made for archaeoastronomy in their locations thanks to the availability of images of the stars and the sun at certain ancient times made possible through the software programme SkyMap, courtesy of the University of Texas. A series of images included in the Report, which reveal the night sky above the complex at 3000 BC and 2500 BC, make a compelling case for orientation on the rising of Orion's Belt, as well as the midwinter solstice sunrise at 3000 BC and 2000 BC as viewed from the Central henge.

An unexpected form of approach to the ordering of this extensive and absorbing Report is that Harding starts with his exposition of the beliefs which may have inspired the construction of the three Thornborough henges, "one of the largest earth-moving episodes ever undertaken in later Neolithic Britain". It helps to explain the use of the term "religion" in the title of this monograph, a word made to stand for what was being thought and understood over 4000 years ago. Harding's selection of his title had worried this reviewer when he first saw it since he unashamedly belongs to the generation Harding derides for preferring words such as "ritual", "ceremony" in their Neolithic and Bronze Age researches. But when Harding qualifies his prehistoric "religion" as a "belief in gods, spirits, ancestors and a supernatural realm of existence" the metaphysical aspect of the holistic Thornborough enquiry can be understood. The chapters of archaeological detail which follow give us the new and the reconsidered data on which his conclusions depend. And finally he goes as far as anyone would dare, to suggest how, over tens of centuries, the complex gradually arose and was used. Though quite why these northern communities thought it was necessary to build three huge circles in a carefully orchestrated and close line and not just one, like the people on the upper Thames, remains something surely nobody can feel able to explain, not even Jan Harding. For the most part this reviewer prefers to stand back in awe, and just wonder.

But without doubt, now, at last, through this masterly application of field archaeology and exegesis can we see that not only in the chalklands of Wessex or in Orcadia was there a superhuman drive to enquire and worship. Ancient peoples in the heart of England had the same inspiration, even whitening their sacred places for some related reason, as our own devoted team of students felt who worked there in 1952.

Your reviewer is proud to feel that his modest excavation and fieldwork around the central henge monument at Thornborough over sixty years ago was the forerunner of such a superb application of modern research by Jan Harding and his presentation of it.

References

Atkinson, R J C, Piggott, C M and Sandars, N, 1951. Excavations at Dorchester, Oxon, 1946-51, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 81-107

Clark, J G D, 1936. The Timber monument at Arminghall and its affinities, *Proc Prehist Soc*, **1**, 1-51

Lukis, W C, 1870. On the flint implements and tumuli of the neighbourhood of Wath, Yorkshire, *Archaeological Topographical Jour* **1**, 116-126

Saville, A, 1983. Excavations at Condicote henge monument, Gloucestershire, 1977, *Trans Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeol Soc*, CI, 21-47

Thomas, N, 1955. The Thornborough Circles, near Ripon, North Riding, *Yorkshire Archaeol J*, **38**, 425-246

Whittle, A, Atkinson, R J C, Chambers, R, and Thomas, N, 1992. Excavations in the Neolithic and Bronze Age Complex at Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, 1947-1952 and 1981, *Proc Prehist Soc*, **58**, 143-201

Nicholas Thomas
Newlyn, Cornwall

Review submitted: February 2014

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