



Book Reviews

NEOLITHIC HORIZONS: MONUMENTS AND CHANGING COMMUNITIES IN THE WESSEX LANDSCAPE BY D FIELD and D McOMISH

Fonthill Media. 2016. 176pp, 40 figures, 30 colour plates. ISBN 978-1-78155-299-5, pb, £18.99

Once I listened to an aspiring archaeologist talking about a 'linear transport trajectory' and it took me a few moments to realise that he was describing a road. Perhaps, word count was more important to him than communication. On another occasion, I heard a spokesman claim that 'two female subjects exhibited a one hundred percent positive mortality response' from which I gathered that sadly two women were dead. However, these are just two examples of the use of technical jargon which did not help to convey a message simply. We all use vocabulary and grammar particular to our subject but it is not always appropriate or desirable to use them, especially when the intended readership is less familiar with crucial terms or concepts. Many technical reports, especially those produced in the commercial sector, are expected to comply with professional standards but consequently they may be structured in a formulaic way, use terminology that is meaningless to the uninitiated, and potentially obscure the significance of the findings. To those who are not used to such reports, they seem unduly long repeating other documents verbatim rather than applying a cross-reference, and they seem impenetrable. Of course, the style may be expected in order to demonstrate compliance with the industry norm but it makes for dull reading and sometimes requires decoding to tease out the more important substance from the lesser. On the assumption that the basic aim of any published book is to communicate the significance of the subject in the most engaging way, then jargon is best avoided if the volume is to have broad appeal. Plain English is a wonderful and versatile language but not every author enthral the reader: not everyone is a literary genius and most of us can only envy their gifted prose. Among the books I have read recently, those that combine great style and substance are rare but happily I count the volume under review here amongst them: if there were a prize for the best-written, jargon-free archaeological book, it would certainly be on my shortlist.

The authors are both experienced field surveyors from the former Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments (England) and hence they practise their profession to the highest standards. They have spent days, weeks and even years tramping the downland of southern England in varied weather conditions developing keen eyes for every subtle inflection of landform that might signal past human intervention. Their field experience is second to none and their knowledge of the subject is, without question, authoritative. As might be expected from archaeologists strongly influenced by the philosophy of Desmond Bonney and Chris Taylor, they suggest their approach is unusual: 'Instead of the sometimes myopic detail from excavations, we explore whole landscapes.' (p14). Nonetheless, in my opinion, excavation and survey are complementary: our current knowledge of landscape evolution and past human inhabitation could not have advanced without recourse to every method available. It would be impossible to comprehend what ceremonies took place at the site of a long barrow, and when, without the evidence from excavations, whether antiquarian or modern. In truth, the authors are well aware of this and they easily meld the results of excavation, non-intrusive survey, and interpretation with their own astute observation that only comes from first-hand field experience. For example, although the often-emphasised relationship between watercourses and monuments could be derived from computer terrain models, they convey a more intimate understanding of the landscape and the way it may have been perceived by people in the past.

The title of the book implies the subject is restricted to Neolithic monuments and communities in Wessex, but the first chapter deals with the flooding of Doggerland and the isolation of Britain from the near Continent long before monument builders arrived in central southern England. Inevitably, much of the scant evidence for human inhabitation at this time derives from excavation, whether in the form of house plans or artefact assemblages. Neither does the second chapter focus on early monuments because it highlights the appearance of ground stone axes from the Continent, the opening of flint mines in various places across the chalk, and the meaning of natural geological phenomena to those who crossed the land. It is only from the third chapter onwards that the appearance of earthen monuments is considered, while the first mention of a typical Neolithic product, namely pottery, is on p.43. Each successive chapter deals with the principal monument types in chronological order – long barrows (Chapter 3), causewayed enclosures (Chapter 4), cursuses and pit circles (Chapter 5), megaliths (Chapter 6) and henges (Chapter 7) – as well as the slighter forms of evidence. The penultimate chapter (Chapter 8) deals with the adoption of Beakers, barrows and bronze and stretches the Neolithic beyond its technological horizon.

The text does not describe individual monuments in detail, offer hachured plans and sections from which to visualize the subject, list all known examples, provide pages of drawings of lithic, ceramic and other finds from excavated sites, or describe the process of archaeology. The authors clearly do not intend such a traditional textbook approach, and I

hasten to add that I am not criticizing but merely offering the would-be reader a preview of the content. The subject matter is well known but, instead of repeating the familiar, the book skilfully weaves together the different strands of evidence to create an engaging narrative which also calls upon a wealth of theoretical interpretation derived from academic literature. Symbolism is everywhere, it seems.

Details of the monuments or material referred to can be found in the works cited in the endnotes, some of which have benefitted from the authors' contributions: *The Field Archaeology of Salisbury Plain* (McOmish *et al.* 2002) and *The Stonehenge Landscape* (Bowden *et al.* 2015) are just two outstanding examples, although the 'Wessex' theme of *Neolithic Horizons* is broader and at times more elastic than the central Wiltshire focus of those two works. Nonetheless, a limited selection of photographs, distribution maps, outline plans of excavated features, and objects is judiciously used where necessary. A section of good colour photographs, many taken from the air, illustrate the outward expression of the main monument types and their modern settings, as well as a few typical pottery finds from excavations.

Commonly, archaeologists like to start their study with retrospection, addressing the question of how successive generations of archaeological enquiry created the current state of knowledge. In a break with this tradition, McOmish and Field cover the ground in an interesting way in their final chapter, not surprisingly noting the development of field survey techniques (Chapter 9: *Coda*). Because of its wealth of well-preserved prehistoric sites, Wessex has commanded attention for centuries. Yet, it remains a dynamic area of research and each year fresh discoveries that inevitably alter the picture of the past are made during fieldwork, whether driven by statutory bodies, academic institutions, threats from development, or community interest. Any synthesis can only provide an overview at one particular time and as new evidence and interpretations emerge, both revisions and new perspectives, such as *Neolithic Horizons*, are always welcome.

Despite the quality of production, a few points in the book did not please me: it was not always crystal clear whether the authors were writing about calibrated or uncalibrated radiocarbon age estimates (dates); I question a few boldly-stated 'facts'; endnotes require two actions to find the appropriate reference; the odd citation is missing from the references; and there is no index. These are minor quibbles, however, given the breadth of the study.

In summary, this relatively short account provides a personal view on the relationship between early monuments and the way people may have perceived their landscape settings. It is beautifully written and provides easy access to a complex subject at different levels. Those new to prehistory may be encouraged to enquire beyond its outline, to follow the leads offered, and to think more about the connections our predecessors may have felt with the land we jointly occupy. The expert with detailed knowledge of certain archaeological minutiae may well enjoy the broad, holistic approach which articulates personal experience, expert observation and theoretical interpretation. Personally, I thank the authors for their dedication and hard work, the product of which I really enjoyed reading.

References

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