

## Book Review

### **CHARIOTS, SWORDS AND SPEARS: IRON AGE BURIALS AT THE FOOT OF THE EAST YORKSHIRE WOLDS, EDITED BY MARK STEPHENS**

*Oxbow Books 2023. 295 pages, 234 figures. ISBN 978-1-78925-542-3 (Hardback, £50), ISBN-978-78925-543-0 (Digital Edition).*

The recent excavations of Iron Age chariot burials at Pocklington in East Yorkshire have captured imaginations and drawn considerable media interest, and for good reason. The evocative scene of two skeletal horses frozen in time, positioned at the yoke as if to pull the chariot and the deceased occupant into the afterlife, seen at The Mile, is powerful and haunting. Though other chariot burials are known in the Iron Age of Britain and the Continent, this one is unique in its configuration. The immense physical effort and collaboration required to pull off such an ostentatious burial is probably matched only by the effort and collaboration exerted in the excavation, and post-excavation analyses, of it. This work has been vividly captured and shared by Stephens and a team of specialists in the current volume.

While the title and cover image may suggest a focus on the more sensational aspects of the recent discoveries, the volume encompasses a broader scope. It represents the archaeological excavations at two sites within Pocklington parish in East Yorkshire: 1) Burnby Lane, a Middle Iron Age inhumation cemetery with over a hundred burials; and 2) The Mile, where three further burials, including the notable chariot burial, were found. These burials fall within a discrete East Yorkshire burial tradition during the British Iron Age—a period generally characterised by an absence of archaeologically visible mortuary practice (Cunnington 1923, 31; Hodson 1964; Whimster 1981). This scarcity of burial evidence is thought to be due to more widespread funerary practices that left no surviving evidence (e.g. Wait 1985; Carr and Knüsel 1997; Harding 2016). Consequently, Iron Age burials available for study are rare, particularly those reflecting the broader population rather than exceptional or ‘deviant’ interments designated for select individuals for whatever reason. Hence, inhumation cemeteries like that at Burnby Lane are exceedingly valuable for understanding the Iron Age demographic in Britain, and this thoroughly descriptive volume provides invaluable insights to this end.

The results of post-excavation analysis are presented in 20 chapters, each focusing on different aspects of the Iron Age archaeology uncovered during excavations: the first (Chapters 1-3) contextualise the excavations by placing the site within its wider geographical and archaeological landscape. Then, the Iron Age burials at Burnby Lane and The Mile are described (Chapters 4-6) and it is here that the stage is set for the specialist reports on the material evidence (Chapters 7-12), human, animal and plant remains (Chapters 13-17) and synthesis (Chapters 18-20).

The cemetery site at Burnby Lane consisted of some 87 burials within barrows, 39 'flat graves' without visible enclosures or mounds, and four potential burials (Chapters 4 and 5, Stephens). Despite the region's acidic soils, which typically erode skeletal remains, sufficient bone material was preserved to determine details such as body positioning, orientation, age and sex, pathologies and trauma, for the majority of people. Stephens provides a description of each burial, focusing on their structures and contents, thus creating an invaluable repository for researchers of Iron Age mortuary practice. For consistency, a quick-reference table to summarise the flat burials in the same style as the table provided for the barrow burials would be helpful to facilitate easy integration of this data into other datasets, but the individual burial descriptions and illustrations make it easy enough to extract required details. In any case, the careful documentation of each interment, including the less elaborate 'normal' graves, offers a more nuanced understanding of life and death in the represented Iron Age community.

The two barrow burials and a related 'satellite' burial at The Mile, *c.* 2km north of Burnby Lane, are described in Chapter 6 (Stephens). Among these is the star of the show—the assembled chariot burial, containing a mature adult male, led by a pair of upright ponies. It is conceivably difficult to represent such a complex, dynamic burial on 2-dimensional pages, but Stephens pulls out all the stops with photographs, illustrations, and even a 3D photogrammetry model of the entire grave. The thorough documentation of the chariot components and their locations within the grave provides essential insight into the construction and design of Iron Age chariots. The two other burials at The Mile—a young adult male in a round barrow and a contemporaneous young adult female with skeletal abnormalities in an adjacent flat grave—hint at interesting and complex social narratives. While the chapter offers limited discussion, the detailed descriptions provide much food for thought and lay the groundwork for the more in-depth discussions in the subsequent specialist chapters.

The following chapters catalogue and discuss the artefactual evidence, including the shields (Chapter 7, Giles and Hitchcock) and weapons (Chapter 8, Inall; Chapter 9, Stephens); chariot fittings

(Chapter 10, Stephens), brooches and bracelets (Chapter 11, Adams), pottery and beads (Chapter 12, Stephens), and slag (Chapter 12, Mackenzie). Notably, the shield from The Mile chariot burial is discussed in dazzling detail in Chapter 7. An insightful analysis by Melanie Giles and Matthew Hitchcock brings to light the shield's stylistic pedigree, placing it within its wider cultural context. Their observation that the shield likely served dual offensive and defensive roles, and may have been ritually 'killed' as part of a funerary performance, underscores the value of specialist examination and cautions against superficial interpretations.

Bioarchaeological analyses are presented in in Chapters 13-17. The osteological report by Anwen Cafell, Malin Holst and Paola Ponce is presented in Chapter 13 is a summary, with the full reports available for download on the Archaeological Data Service (ADS). The analysis, centred on pathology and trauma, is enriched with numerous high-resolution images. While the inclusion of scale bars would enhance these visuals for reader orientation and improve accessibility for non-specialists, the integration of images within what is typically a descriptive, text-heavy type of report is nonetheless commendable and welcome. It is noteworthy that alongside the 121 complete Iron Age skeletons found at Burnby Lane, 211 occurrences of disarticulated human remains were also recovered from burial contexts, but these are not discussed in the chapter. The lack of radiocarbon dating for these is unfortunate, as this data could greatly advance our understanding of varied mortuary processes that result in disarticulation, such as exhumation, curation, and the reuse of graves that may have been occurring simultaneously. Given the large number of complete inhumations to contend with, it's understandable that the disarticulated remains have yet to be fully analysed, but hopefully future research will include a more considered examination of these. Histological analysis of bone diagenesis, for example, could shed some light on the circumstances of disarticulation.

Although much has been learned about the Iron Age in East Yorkshire through the excavations at Pocklington and surrounds, there are still many unanswered questions regarding burial rites. Why were some people buried in barrows, whilst others without; of those in barrows, why are some square, others round? Why were some people buried with weapons and jewellery, others with nothing (at least, nothing that remains)? Why were some chariots interred whole, a few now even with ponies, while others were dismantled (like those at Wetwang Slack; Dent 1985)? It is an unfortunate inevitability that the region's soil conditions make for poor collagen preservation, resulting in failed radiocarbon and isotope attempts for a number of sampled skeletons, as these details might detect temporal, lifestyle, and migration differences that could inform on the variation seen at Burnby Lane and The Mile. Nevertheless, the successful analyses presented in this volume provide unprecedented insights

into who people were, including a brother and sister pair that help to tighten up the site chronology as well as demonstrating that both women and men moved around in the Middle Iron Age of East Yorkshire. Of course, it is possible that, as pointed out in Chapter 19 (Stephens), the differences in burial characteristics may be simply down to preference, without necessarily any deeper, more symbolic meaning, which is equally interesting.

Overall, the volume stands out for its detailed descriptions and abundance of figures, serving as a rich repository of data rather than engaging extensively in theoretical discourse. However, the synthesis in Chapters 18-20 (Ware and Stephens) provide insightful discussion points and observations that pave the way for future research. As chariot burials inevitably continue to be discovered—within East Yorkshire, and beyond—this volume sets a high bar and clearly demonstrates the value in taking a comprehensive approach. There's something for everyone: a catalogue of burial data with thorough osteological analysis; show-stopping artefacts such as the The Mile Shield, weapons and jewellery; multi-isotopes (see Chapter 17, Hamilton *et al.*); and an enviable radiocarbon programme (Chapter 16, Hamilton and Adams). It's an essential addition to the shelf of anyone interested in Iron Age Britain, especially those of us who spend all our time pondering its mortuary practices.

*Adelle Bricking*

*Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales*

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