



Book Reviews

A BIOGRAPHY OF POWER: RESEARCH AND EXCAVATIONS AT THE IRON AGE OPPIDUM OF BAGENDON, GLOUCESTERSHIRE (1979–2017), BY TOM MOORE

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Major earthwork complexes known as *oppida* emerge towards the end of the Iron Age throughout Europe. Their role and function have been central to debates about the nature of indigenous urbanisation and social complexity, particularly in the bow wave of increasing contact with the Roman world. It has become progressively more apparent in recent years however that considerable differences existed between sites labelled as *oppida*. In Britain a distinction has been made between so-called ‘enclosed’ and ‘territorial’ *oppida*, the latter referring to complexes with discontinuous earthworks. These ‘territorial’ *oppida* possess evidence of separate zones or ‘foci’ of activity (such as settlement, burial and craft working) and have been labelled ‘polyfocal’ by Colin Haselgrove and others. The discontinuous earthworks of such sites seemingly make little sense in terms of enclosure and have been suggested to have functioned, in part, to guide movement through large areas of the landscape.

Much of the work and discussion of British *oppida* has centred, until recently, on the so called ‘royal sites’ of south-east England such as Colchester (*Camulodunum*), St Albans (*Verlamion*) and Silchester (*Calleva Atrebatum*). Large-scale investigations at these sites have revealed evidence of metalworking, coin production, rich burials and other high-status goods of Roman and native origin, and, accordingly, they feature large in the narratives concerning Late Iron Age state development and the emergence of kingship. Bagendon is located outside of this ‘core’ south-eastern zone, in the Cotswold hills of Gloucestershire. The earthwork complex that constitutes the putative *oppidum* has long been known about, but the first serious investigations of the site were undertaken only relatively recently by Elsie Clifford in the 1950s. She argued that Bagendon was the pre-Roman tribal capital of the *Dobunni* and a major *oppidum* of equal significance to those in the south-east. However, the lack of rich burials and its marginal position in western Britain has meant it has remained rather peripheral within the narratives of Late Iron Age and early Roman developments.

This substantial new volume aims to alter that perception and provides an authoritative and comprehensive review of the research and excavations undertaken at Bagendon over the last 40 years. This includes an important review of previously unpublished excavations undertaken by Richard Reece and Stephen Trow in the Bagendon valley between 1979 and 1981, the reassessment of developer-led fieldwork in the 1990s and a major, decade-long, campaign of survey and excavation by the author from 2008. It constitutes a significant achievement by Tom Moore and the many contributors, and closely-follows publication of another 'peripheral' *oppidum* – that of Stanwick, Yorkshire (Haselgrove 2016). In tandem, these two volumes challenge the way we perceive territorial *oppida* outside of the south-east and highlight the important social and political roles such complexes possessed.

The Bagendon complex is defined by a rather incoherent set of dyke systems spread over c.200 ha containing evidence of dispersed activity and settlement spanning much of the latter half of the first millennium BC and into the Roman period. Attempting to make sense of such a vast 'site' is problematic and for this reason Moore asks us to conceptualise the complex as a 'wider landscape.' The approach adopted to explore this wider landscape is a 'biographical' one in which the various landscape elements that form the focus of study are examined in chronological order. This is a welcome and refreshing approach and one that is probably best able to deal with the dispersed material and structural remains. The intention is to provide an appreciation of landscape transformation and Moore's thesis is that such modelling and remodelling of landscape features in the Bagendon complex reflects the changing nature and display of power. The focus on power relationships is understandable and provides the volume its title – 'a biography of power' – but it is clear that other 'biographies' for this landscape existed and could have been written, a point Moore acknowledges himself.

The volume is split into six parts (I–VI) and 25 chapters. Part I (Chapter 1) provides the background to, and history of, research at Bagendon. Although brief, this is essential, and it supplies the context for the serious 'meat' that constitutes the examination of the Bagendon complex in Part II (Chapters 2–5). Chapter 2 reviews the remote-sensing surveys undertaken from 2008-2016 in which around 172 ha of the wider Bagendon complex was covered by geophysical survey. In of itself, this is an impressive feat and of particular significance – only very rarely is such landscape-scale geophysics attempted – but Moore also combines the magnetometry results with Lidar data and aerial photographic mapping by Historic England's National Mapping Programme, to produce a remarkable overall assessment of the Bagendon landscape. Presenting such results, however, poses significant challenges in a conventional book. It is achieved here by splitting the landscape into a series of smaller blocks which are dealt with in turn. This is satisfying enough within the confines of this publication, but the format makes it difficult to appreciate the complexity and detail of the entire landscape. A future aim should be

to provide an online version using open-source mapping software that would allow researchers to view and interrogate the data themselves, similar perhaps to what has been achieved by the Landscape Research Centre for the Vale of Pickering, North Yorkshire.

The remaining chapters (3–5) of Part II deal with the excavated evidence, which is presented chronologically. Chapter 3 details the results of excavations at two unusual banjo-like enclosures – Scrubditch and Cutham – both located within the (later) dyke system of the *oppidum*. Banjo enclosures have been increasingly recognised right across southern Britain since their categorisation as a distinctive class of monuments by B.T. Perry in the 1960s, although their role and function remain ill-defined. Their characteristic ‘funnel-like’ entrance ways have often been associated with managing livestock, but that they may have possessed important social roles associated with the gathering of people and moving of animals seems likely. Excavations at the Scrubditch and Cutham enclosures produced a range of radiocarbon dates, which after Bayesian modelling (Chapter 13), indicated both were constructed at some point in the 4th or 3rd century BC and abandoned by the 1st century BC around the time the Bagendon complex underwent major transformation. This is significant for two reasons. First, few banjo enclosures have been securely dated so this work adds much to the debates around their emergence. Second, and more importantly, the 4th to 3rd century (Middle Iron Age) dates confirm that the location of the later *oppidum* complex was already socially significant in terms of occupation, and possibly as a gathering place for people and herds.

Chapter 4 reviews a range of excavations that deal with occupation and activity associated with the Late Iron Age *oppidum*. Of particular importance is the presentation of previously unpublished results of excavations by Richard Reece and Stephen Trow. These works were originally intended to reassess Clifford’s findings, particularly the dating evidence, and comprised two area-excavations opened adjacent to Clifford’s trenches, within a zone of intensive activity in the Bagendon valley. A number of features were identified, including pits and trackways, and an important ceramic assemblage was recovered whose assessment appears to support Clifford’s assertion that the origin of the *oppidum* was pre-conquest, at some point in the early 1st century AD, with its apogee probably spanning the AD 30s to AD 50s.

Clifford had originally proposed an end date to occupation in the valley in the AD 60s or 70s, which she related to the development of the nearby Roman town of Cirencester (*Corinium*). However, geophysical surveys had identified a number of stone buildings, of possible Roman date, overlooking the Bagendon valley. Chapter 5 details the results of excavations of one of these at Black Grove in 2015, which revealed a villa-type structure built in the early to mid-2nd century AD. It is clearly one of several in the Bagendon landscape, the implication being that high-status elements developed within the complex *after* the conquest.

Part III (Chapters 6–14) deals with the material evidence. There are important reviews of the ceramic assemblage (Chapter 6) and brooches (Chapter 7) on which much of the chronological sequence relies, while the analytical study of the bloomery slag (Chapter 9) is significant for identifying the presence of rare Iron Age ‘sunken hearth’ furnaces. The Iron Age coin assemblage totals 73 (Chapter 10). This is a major grouping and comparable to those recovered from some other oppida such as St. Albans (*Verlamion*). As would be expected, most of the coins are regional types with a small number attesting to links further afield. The assemblage is notable for an Allen IJ unit that had been perforated, presumably in order that the coin could have been worn or displayed on a necklace. A small number of coin moulds retrieved from the excavations from 1979–81 indicate that at least some of the coins were minted at Bagendon. The assemblage of other material culture such as objects made from stone, bone and glass is presented in Chapter 12. It appears somewhat meagre however, which is odd, given the potential intensity of activity at the site.

The environmental evidence is dealt with in Part IV (Chapters 15–18) and there is lots of interest here for the specialist. In particular, the isotopic analysis of human and animal remains (Chapter 17) adds to a growing corpus of work which suggest that during the Iron Age some animals, and by inference people, may have been moving long distances. Part V (Chapters 19–23) deals with a range of landscape studies that includes the analysis of land snails, GIS viewshed and least-cost analyses, and two further geophysical surveys at sites in the broader environs of the Bagendon complex. However, the final chapter of Part V (Chapter 23: ‘Becoming the *Dobunni*’) and the concluding chapters contained within Part VI, are undoubtedly the most important and powerful. Of particular significance is Moore’s critical reflection on what actually constitutes an *oppidum* in Late Iron Age Britain. This places Bagendon in its regional and national context and provides a thought-provoking conclusion.

Overall, this is an excellent volume, full of interesting and important insights. One bugbear is that its paperback format feels unwieldy, especially in comparison with other volumes of this size and length, and a hardback version would have been welcome. That aside, this is a significant publication that adds much to our growing understanding of developing social complexity, identity and power during the Late Iron Age in Britain.

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Editor