



Book Reviews

A LAKE DWELLING IN ITS LANDSCAPE: IRON AGE SETTLEMENT AT CULTS LOCH, CASTLE KENNEDY, DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY BY G. CAVERS AND A. CRONE

Oxbow Books, 2018. 304pp, 178 illustrations (col & B&W). 34 tables, hb, ISBN 9781785703737, £36.00

Despite archaeological interest in the 'lake dwellings' of Scotland and Ireland dating back to the 19th century and the work of Munro (1882) and Wade Martin (1886) these monuments remain poorly understood. Although there are some notable exceptions (e.g. O' Sullivan 1998; Fredengren 2002; Fredengren *et al.* 2010) remarkably few investigations have been carried out in either of these countries, utilising modern techniques and approaches. As the introductory chapter to this book observes, it is really only in the last decade or so that concerted archaeological attention has turned to the Scottish sites, rising from a concerted effort to remedy this situation, with the development of a research framework for wetland archaeology in 2007 (SWAP 2007). The excavations and associated programmes of study arose directly from this framework, with techniques utilised ranging from documentary research, aerial photography, geophysical survey, excavation, artefactual and environmental analyses, dendrochronological and radiocarbon dating. The central focus of the volume is Cults Loch 3, the excavations and analyses of a 'promontory crannog', which was in fact originally identified as a possible rare 'lake side' dwelling, but was subsequently discovered during excavation to be linked to the shore via a causeway. It should be added that Cults Loch 1 is a 'classic' *crannóg*, the remains of which were first identified in the loch in the 19th century but is now a scheduled monument.

The book thus presents a detailed investigation of a relatively small area (less than 1 km²) centred on Cults Loch itself (also quite small at 0.6 km², although reduced in area through time due to hydrosereal succession), with a collection of archaeological sites on both wet and adjacent dryland indicating activity from the Neolithic onwards. The excavations of Cults Loch 3 between 2007–2010 focused on an estimated 35% of the total site and the results of this work account for a greater part of the book (Chapter 2). The dryland sites are discussed in separate chapters (although Cults Loch 2 and 6 share a very short chapter): Cults Loch 4, a multi-period promontory fort (Chapter 3), Cult Lochs 5, a palisaded enclosure (Chapter 4; also with a span of activity stretching from the Neolithic to the Iron Age) and Cults Loch 2 and 6, a knoll in the

northwestern corner of the loch, and associated enigmatic pit complex (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 outlines the chronological programme and Chapter 7 presents a discussion of 'The material world of Iron Age Wigtownshire', placing the sites within a broader context of finds in the area from later prehistory. This is followed by the results of the palaeoenvironmental programme (Chapter 8). Chapter 9 discusses the sites within a broader chronological and cultural context and a final short concluding Chapter 10 presents an overview of the aims and results of the work.

This is an impressive book; well organised, and marshalling a considerable body of diverse and detailed information. It is clearly written and very well illustrated: plans of wetland sites, especially those with complex stratigraphies of wooden remains, can often end up hindering rather than helping the reader visualise the excavations, but this is certainly not the case here. This is helped by abundant the use of photographs, which are very well reproduced. Photographs of brown wood against brown peat can challenge even highly competent photographers but again this aspect of recording has been dealt with very well. The environmental archaeological component of wetland excavations is always critical and it is good to see these data at the heart of the site narrative. Interpreting the stratigraphies of wetland sites can also be a particular challenge; micromorphology comes through in Chapter 1 as a technique that can be of great utility for understanding the formation processes of onsite peat deposits, especially when complimented by standard palaeoenvironmental analyses. The micromorphological studies carried out by Lynne Roy, are neatly integrated with the plant macrofossil and insect analyses by Jackaline Robertson and Enid Allison respectively to produce syntheses of each context, providing important interpretive information (Chapter 2). It would appear from these data, that the inhabitants of Cult Loch 3 were very concerned with keeping the floors of the crannog clean and dry, whilst areas of dumping and refuse disposal are also identified.

Also, the micromorphology illuminates the ubiquitous complexities arising from taphonomic processes, with bioturbation and flooding leading to truncation and reworking of the deposits. This issue brings us neatly onto the 'offsite' multiproxy analyses (pollen, diatoms, loss on ignition and XRF) of a core from the Loch, carried out by Thierry Fonville, Tony Brown and Ciara Clarke, reported in Chapter 8. Pollen and other proxy analyses are of course an essential component of understanding archaeological sites within their changing landscape context, but one that requires robust chronological control. In this instance, it would appear that reworking and redeposition of older peat deposits has significantly affected the sampled deposits, with the associated chronological programme producing a series of inversions and anomalous radiocarbon dates. This of course, unfortunately effects the reliability of the associated palaeoenvironmental data. Given the time and expense spent on such analyses, it seems

increasingly prudent to put initial resources into establishing how chronologically robust sediment sequences are before further detailed proxy analysis.

The abundance of wood and other organic material on wetland archaeological sites resents excellent opportunities for investigating the timing and duration of human activity. Chronological control for Cults Loch 3 utilised established methods of radiocarbon dating and dendrochronology, the latter drawing on the usual oak chronologies but also attempting to utilise the abundant alder timbers, although the latter did not produce an overall site chronology. The value of 'wiggles matching' and Bayesian modelling is once again well illustrated; two scenarios were identified as plausible but both indicated that the duration of activity on the crannog was in the order of a maximum of two human generations.

What emerges from the excavations and associated analyses, is that the Cult Loch 3 settlement seems to have been built, occupied and abandoned in less than half a century: '...within the space of a few decades in the latter half of the 5th century BC.' (p.46). A final phase of activity followed in the 2nd century BC which might have been contemporary with re-occupation of the Cults Loch 5 palisaded enclosure. In turn this appears to fit into broader patterns of *crannóg*, construction in Scotland, which as the authors observe, are currently poorly understood. What does seem to be evident, is that many of these sites may have been occupied on a seasonal basis. Something else that jumps out, is the relatively few number of artefacts recovered – a total of only nine, although including a mysterious wooden box, an ardshare and wooden boards. It would appear that other material might have been lost due to its location above the 'preservation horizon' across the site, related to fluctuations in the water table.

Despite the profusion of information, we are still left rather grasping at certain answers. The exact form and arrangement of the structures on the crannog, the relationship between the different sites investigated and explanations as to why people chose to settle 'on the water' at particular points in prehistory. The authors draw attention to the lack of interpretations that can be framed in '...purely functional terms...' (p.237) and discuss a series of other possible scenarios. This is often the irony of wetland archaeology: an abundance of well-preserved archaeological and palaeoenvironmental remains, with excellent chronological control, which can nevertheless leave us with more questions than clear answers!

The work reported in this volume is timely and important, for future 'lake settlement' research both in Scotland and Ireland. It is an invaluable contribution for anyone with interests in prehistoric lake settlements, methods and approaches in wetland archaeology, and the later prehistory of Scotland. There is a wealth of information to ponder and the project provides a methodological blueprint for integrated archaeological research and also presents a series of

hypotheses concerning these sites and associated human activity, that future work can seek to test. The authors and their collaborators should be congratulated. To close on a less positive note: as the authors note early in the book, the prognosis for the long-term preservation *in situ* of many *crannógs*, (as is the case for many other wetland sites) in Scotland, is uncertain. The archaeological community needs to face up to this problem and to develop further integrated projects to investigate those at risk, before it is too late.

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