



## Book Reviews

### **PATTERN AND PROCESS: LANDSCAPE PREHISTORIES FROM WHITTLESEY BRICK PITS, THE KING'S DYKE AND BRADLEY FEN EXCAVATIONS 1998–2004** by MARK KNIGHT AND MATT BRUDENELL

*CAU Must Farm/Flag Fen Basin Depth and Time series 1, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2020, 418pp, 193 B&W and colour figs and pls, 81 tables ISBN 978-1-902937-93-9, £45.00*

This book follows the familiar format of Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) monographs and presents the results of extensive excavations carried out in advance of mineral extraction. The text boxes typical of CAU books are a little less prominent in this volume, the most significant are four 'Spatial-temporal configurations' which focus attention on '...a re-emphasizing of the vertical correspondence to the site's subtle, but intricate topographic and sedimentary history' (p138). That is fundamental to the book, by a careful focus on the site's sedimentary stratigraphy in relation to archaeological features and deposits, a clear account of the way the landscape was occupied and utilised is presented. In doing so the authors provide a body of data and interpretation which will be of value to anyone interested in the archaeology of the second and first millennia BC.

Chapter 1 'The Introduction' notes that Bradley Fen has already been quite widely cited and its overall plan reproduced. It has been used almost as an idealised exemplar of a Bronze Age landscape; articulating barrows, fields, roundhouses, burnt mounds and metal deposits. In fact, as the book goes on to demonstrate, these things were not all contemporary parts of a single whole. The area investigated was very large, not so much a site as a chunk of landscape, the smaller of the two areas of excavation, King's Dyke, was somewhat higher and dryer the larger area, Bradley Fen, ran westward into lower wetter ground.

Chapter 2 'Project history and setting' provides an account of the inception of the project and its local context. It demonstrates once again the need for careful thought in designing evaluation and excavation strategies. For instance, at Kings Dyke, several phases of trench-based evaluation revealed extensive Roman occupation but provided almost no indication of prehistoric activity. The area designated for excavation was 'shrunk' in classic fashion to fit around a concentration of features, or 'site'. By contrast an expansive approach was taken at Bradley Fen, embracing the

investigation of apparently blank zones and covering the entire area of the mineral extraction. That approach allowed for a detailed account of human use of the landscape to be developed. The investigations took place on the opposite side of the Flag Fen Basin from Fengate, the Flag Fen platform lying about 1 km north-west of Bradley Fen. The area has seen many archaeological investigations which are helpfully summarised, in text descriptions, tables and maps. An overview of the prehistoric environment is also provided, based on analysis of buried soils and pollen data, such that '...there are few landscapes in the whole of Britain where a comparably detailed picture of changing environmental textures can be set against an equally impressive record of archaeological remains...' (p.38). The changing balance between dry land and wetland, crucial to an understanding of the archaeology both of Bradley Fen and the wider area, is described and summarised in a sequence of maps.

The next four chapters form the core of the book they are essentially ordered chronologically, though crucially the chapter headings focus on key aspects of the landscape. The specialist reports are clear with full presentation of data and plentiful illustration, they are well integrated into the general interpretation of the evidence. Interpretation being the key word since each chapter not only presents the excavated data but discusses it in relation both to Bradley Fen/King's Dyke and the wider archaeology of the area.

Issues of land tenure are a dominant interpretative theme; the authors make explicit use of the interpretive framework offered in the mid '90s by Barrett (1994) and it is good to be reminded of that insightful work. As Chapter 3, which considers 'A pre-field system landscape' from 2200–1500 cal BC, notes '...the features described here may have belonged to a *long fallow* system, as opposed to the kind of *short fallow systems* described in later chapters.' (p.51). Amongst the key components were three monuments, a henge and two barrows, on the relatively high ground of Kings Dyke, four burnt mounds at Bradley Fen and three roundhouses. The earliest roundhouse had a central hearth which yielded a radiocarbon date indicating a date at the end of the third millennium BC. Features nearby produced Beaker pottery and contemporary flintwork. The house was located at the lowest western part of Bradley Fen at about 0 m OD one of the four burnt mounds was similarly low lying and presumably broadly contemporary. The other two roundhouses, associated with Collared Urn pottery, were situated higher one at Kings Dyke the other at about 3.5 m OD at Bradley Fen. The other three burnt mounds ran in a line across Bradley Fen just below 1 m OD. It is suggested that at Bradley Fen, Must Fam and quite possibly the whole of the western fen edge, burnt mounds are confined to a limited temporal and spatial zone between, 2300–1500 cal BC, and -1 and +1 m OD. The spacing of three of the Bradley Fen mounds in a row about 60m apart may suggest a pattern around the western fen edge, which would be similar to the scatters of burnt flint about every 55m around the Wissey embayment on the eastern side. The authors note that there are now quite a number of settlement sites

associated with Collared Urn in the Nene Valley and demonstrate that in the Early Bronze Age Bradley Fen was river valley rather than a fenland location. A convincing case is made that the people who used Bradley Fen were part of a community that embraced the whole valley. Following Barrett, they suggest extended movement and mobility with prolonged 'fallow' periods affecting not simply the pastoral/agricultural economy. Monuments such as barrows were not continuously used repositories of the dead of particular genealogies, but unfrequented for long periods and periodically revitalised as places where shared practices around the burial of the dead were enacted. The people '...had a *distributed* rather than a *centred* notion of what constituted place...' (p.134), indeed it might have been said of the Early Bronze Age inhabitants of the Nene valley that they '...have a notion of territorial domain (*territoire*) but lack any sense of a specific tract of land which they think of as individually theirs (*terroir*).' (Richards 1978, 276).

Bradley Fen is perhaps most famous for its fieldsystem, and Chapter 4 considers 'Fieldsystem, Settlement and metalwork' and covers a period from 1500 to 1100 cal BC. The coaxial fieldsystem at Bradley Fen was created at a time when the occupation was beginning to be focused on the developing wetland of the Flag Fen Basin, rather than the river valley. The fieldsystem comprised parallel strips aligned north-east-south-west, terminating at its western, downslope end with a terminus ditch. Survival of the up-slope boundaries is patchy, but the surviving lengths of ditch appear relatively smooth sided. By contrast, the terminus ditch is better preserved and rather different, low lying extremely sinuous and with its bank partly surviving, it seems to be a replacement for a dead hedge or fence line. In view of the line quoted in the paragraph above it might be expected that the creation of these fields would be the occasion for discussion of short fallow. In fact, whilst, in this and subsequent chapters, tenure remains central to interpretation (though the use of the term seems increasingly diffuse) short fallow drops from sight.

The manipulation of access to, and tenure of, land can often be a means by which individuals or groups within society seek to aggregate to themselves wealth and power. Historical examples include the 17th-century draining of the fens, the enclosures of the late 18th/early 19th century and our own day, when it is estimated that about 1% of the population owns around 50% of the land in England (Shrubsole 2020), moves are afoot to make trespass a criminal offence and there is a growing divide between those who buy and those who rent their homes. It may be that similar issues arose in prehistory, perhaps the wide variation in the form of fieldsystems created in the Middle Bronze Age '...there would look to be as many types of fieldsystem as there are sites...' (p.390), reflects the ways various groups worked through the tensions which could be created around tenure, access and ownership. The authors argue that at Bradley Fen the fields may have replicated pre-existing, less permanent, boundaries and are more to do with continuity rather than drastic change. If so, perhaps they are an archaeological embodiment of the famous line from *The Leopard* 'For things to remain the same, everything must change.'

Next to its fields Bradley Fen is well known for its metalwork finds, which are treated with full description, careful analysis and discussion, illustrated by many photographs and drawings. 'A metal detector survey of the lower contours produced 26 bronzes.' (p.180). Six items are individual spearheads, complete and with little or no damage, the other 20 items were from a hoard; all weapons or weapon related, fragments of swords and scabbard chapes, spearheads and ferrules, mostly heavily damaged. In view of what is said above about the need careful thought in designing evaluation and excavation strategies; it would be good to know whether the metal detector survey was part of the methodology for the whole site, or whether it was specifically targeted at the lower contours. Whilst the metalwork does not relate to the inception of the fieldsystem; it was deposited about 200 years after the ditched system was created, there is correlation between field boundaries and metalwork. The spears relate to the major downslope terminus ditch and to short spurs of ditch running into the developing fen. Two spears were isolated finds, the other four loosely associated in a rough line, all were found pointing away from the ditch spurs as if thrown from the upstanding ditch bank. The hoard was found on a small natural mound close to the terminal boundary and directly opposite a T-junction with another field boundary. It may be that the pattern of spear deposition continued around the Flag Fen Basin so that '...there is every reason to believe that further bronzes will be found at intervals of about 90–100 m and somewhere between the 0.4–1.0 m OD contour.' (p.187). It is noted that whilst the general location of the spears could have been recalled their precise position would not have been easy to locate (except perhaps where a spear shaft stuck up above the developing fen) by contrast the hoard was deposited in a location where it could quite easily have been revisited and recovered, if desired.

The integration of finds of metalwork with settlement and other strands of evidence has long been an issue for Bronze Age studies. The metalwork often lacks contextual information, recent work in the fens has certainly begun to change that; the Bradley Fen metalwork joins the material from Flag Fen and Must Farm, fieldwork elsewhere has also begun to provide clear contextual data the Havering Hoard being an obvious recent example. Now might be a good time for a project reviewing what we know of the context of Bronze Age metal finds, that would complement work on the landscape setting of such finds (Yates & Bradley 2010) and the recent study of metalworking evidence (Webley *et al.* 2020).

All the metal finds from Bradley Fen are weapons or weapon related, silent witness to the violence which from time to time must have affected the people who lived there. The phrase 'silent witness' is apposite, the description of the remains of a woman recovered from a Middle Bronze Age (MBA) waterhole; head down, the skull twisted sideways and jammed against the side of the whole, the wrists crossed as if tied and arms folded tightly under the body, is something more associated with *Silent Witness*, or some other TV crime series, than an archaeological excavation report. It

appears to be an example of violence in the lives of the inhabitants. Writing of people *living* at Bradley Fen may not be appropriate, there were no MBA houses and only one rather lightly built roundhouse of Late Bronze Age (LBA) date with possibly another at Kings Dyke. The authors suggest that domestic occupation had moved out into the developing wetland itself; citing the Must Farm platform and suggesting that the Flag Fen platform may have served domestic purposes; another reminder that in prehistory a dichotomy between domestic and ritual is often false.

Chapter 5 considers 'Settlement in the Post-Fieldsystem landscape' covering the period 1100–350 cal BC. The contrast between the lack of houses in the MBA and LBA is stark, At King's Dyke there were 10 Early Iron Age (EIA) roundhouses, and a number of four-post structures. The plan looks village-like but careful analysis of the finds, building morphology and a few radiocarbon dates suggests successive, slightly shifting occupation, with perhaps two or three roundhouses occupied at any one time. As with all the chapters in this book, the analysis of bone, pottery, fired clay and other artefacts is of considerable significance both for this site and beyond. As a pottery specialist I was particularly struck by the identification of vessel sets of Fengate-Cromer style pots indicative of formal dining/feasting and the suggestion that specialised use of these ceramics may '...explain why we can identify geographical 'style-zones' from these vessels, but not other types of contemporary pot.' (p.277). Chapter 6 'The Arrival of Fen-Edge Settlement' c.350–100 cal BC covers the Middle Iron Age (MIA), in some ways the plan of the MIA settlement with prominent roundhouses and four-post structures in broadly linear arrangement appears similar to the EIA. However, there are clear differences, the EIA settlement was on the high ground at King's Dyke and ran roughly east–west, the MIA settlement moved to the lower ground and ran roughly north–south along the fen edge, hence the chapter title. Of particular significance is the evidence for iron production including the substantial remains of a furnace which '...may well have been re-used 6-10 times, thereby satisfying the entire iron production phase recorded at Bradley Fen.' (p.319). The treatment of the MIA human remains shows considerable variety, one burial is of particular interest. The body, carefully crammed into a posthole of one of the four-post structures, appeared to have been in a state of decay before burial. Indicating both that the body must have been carefully stored before interment and the complexity of the uses to which four-post structures were put. In fact, although scarcely touched on in this review, the burial evidence from all periods of these excavations has considerable significance for our understanding of burial practice in the first and second millennia BC.

The final chapter 'Discussion' brings together some of the themes considered in earlier chapters including wider regional and national implications and considers future prospects; an interesting end to a thoughtful and thought-provoking book.

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