



Book Reviews

A GEOGRAPHY OF OFFERINGS: DEPOSITS OF VALUABLES IN THE LANDSCAPE OF ANCIENT EUROPE BY RICHARD BRADLEY

Oxbow Books. 2017. 222pp, 28 B&W figs, 1 table, ISBN 978-1-78570-477-2, pb, £15.99

Richard Bradley has written a pocket-sized archaeology book that is packed full of useful information and carries the reader along through a discussion of the implications of current and past interpretations of ancient practices of hoarding, of special deposits and offerings of valuables. It is not the definitive word on the subject, nor can it be. As Bradley himself notes 'There is no one answer'. What it does provide are pointers to a vast dataset of collected research on distinctive deposits across many periods and in a number of regions. This palimpsest of information is presented in a manner accessible both to those new to the subject and to those with a detailed knowledge of individual periods or types of evidence.

The overall approach of the book highlights the main problem with studying 'deposits of valuables': they inspire us to search for an interpretation of their meaning, significance and purpose but ultimately leave us with no final conclusion. This is not to say that we should avoid undertaking such a process but instead we should be prepared that the best fit theory, the one each researcher personally feels overrides all others, cannot be conclusively proven. Instead we may delight in the intellectual play of compiling, assessing and questioning the evidence and our interpretations: a process that can be enjoyed whatever your background. As human beings who have complex relationships with objects we all can have a view on why people in the past put them in the ground or in rivers or wedged them in rock crevices. What Bradley wants to encourage us to do is test these theories against the evidence. The evidence he highlights is complex and myriad but also shows some intriguing similarities across time and space. He has brought his depth of knowledge to address the ways in which we might attempt to understand how and why humans in the past deposited these remains and why we find them so beguiling. As a prehistorian his approach is biased towards the prehistoric periods, in particular the Late Bronze Age, although he also draws analogies from specific post-Roman remains. He is aware of the limitations of analogies drawn from places and periods that are both temporally and spatially distant but he seems to be searching for what it is that causes the repetition of this movement of objects out of the realm of physical, bodily contact into very specific landscape locations; practices that he believes begin during the Mesolithic period and continue to the present day, albeit in altered and culturally specific forms. It is a broad brush approach with close examination of a select few examples, especially those for which the archaeological context is not limited merely to the specific spot in which the objects were discovered.

The chapters are arranged as individual essays on different issues relating to the evidence or interpretation of these deposits. These essays have the feel of oral lectures. They commence with dramatic, attention grabbing references to authors and thinkers one might not immediately connect with archaeological interpretation, although the connection is soon made clear. Occasionally sentences jump into the text, as moments of inspiration that happen when one is presenting to an audience. These would be useful interjections in a public presentation, to keep and test the audience's attention but they have a tendency to interrupt the flow of the written text. This style is a little awkward to read at times but does not detract from the general enjoyment of the gathered information and analysis. Greater control appears to have been enforced on the structure of the argument in different chapters but in Chapter 5 and towards the end of the book the argument drifts and fluctuates like the watery environments he discusses. One is left

with the impression that there was not enough space to fit in all his ideas which left limited room for the final analysis and conclusion. Perhaps this is the very nature of the subject under study, it is ever ongoing and no definitive conclusion can be reached.

Different readers will at times be both delighted in the detail presented and left with some questions. The figures are informative but their stylised form can disguise the complexity and ambiguity of the evidence. Interesting comparisons are made between the types of material found at these sites but the single table as printed on page 76 (Chapter 4 'Proportional Representation') is confusing: it is not clear which sites are those mainly associated with animal bone and artefacts and which with metalwork only. As a researcher examining the social context of later prehistoric metalworking I was pleased to read Chapter 7, 'A King of Regeneration', that considered the processes and pathways by which metal objects arrived at the state in which they were placed in the ground or under water. In other chapters I was inspired to look further into aspects of the prehistoric remains that could contribute to our understanding of the social context of the period.

In Chapter 10, 'Thresholds and Transitions' the final site discussed, Dail na Caraidh, Highland, provides a suitable conclusion to his argument: examination of the varied geographical contexts of the finds not only brings us closer to understanding why they were placed in these specific places but also instils in us something of the wonder of the archaeology and those places. Bradley is advocating a long-term broad geographical approach to the problem of special deposits proposing this to be the best solution. The problem of a broad brush approach is that certain aspects have not been explored in as much detail as I would have liked. For instance, in Chapter 6, 'The Nature of Things', he mentions the difference in the Iron Age contrasts the deposition of copper alloy cast objects at typically dryland locations with sheet metal items which may also be found in watery environments. Perhaps a closer examination of the evidence could have highlighted the complexity of the patterning or indicated intentional contradictions to normative behaviour. For example, the largest single deposit of Iron Age cauldrons in Britain consisting of 17 complete examples was found in a pit at the dryland settlement near Chiseldon, Wiltshire (Joy 2014, 328; Baldwin and Joy 2017); and although cast brooch deposition is rare in rivers in Britain, there is a concentration of Early and Middle Iron Age examples in the Thames (Adams 2014, 181). I also felt that more attention could have been given to the people involved in the processes of deposition to fully explore the geography of these archaeological remains.

Ultimately, the book achieves its purpose to encourage contemplation of the geography of these distinctive deposits and to encourage further research and further thought on this intriguing but loaded matter. It is a useful addition to the *Oxbow Insights In Archaeology* series and an enjoyable read that engenders debate as the author intended.

References

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