



## Book Reviews

### **THE PREHISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE A477 ST CLEARS TO RED ROSES ROAD IMPROVEMENT SCHEME 2012 BY ALISTAIR BARBER, ALAN HARDY AND ANDREW MUDD**

*Cotswold Archaeology Monograph 12, Cirencester. 2019, 144pp, 80 B&W and col figs, 38 tables, hb, ISBN 978-0-9934545-5-4, £19.95*

Welsh archaeology, and Welsh prehistory in particular, have been blessed in recent years with an explosion of new discoveries stemming from large scale road, pipeline and other large-scale development projects. The results have been difficult to keep pace with but reward the effort. This volume is a significant addition to this bonanza. Handsomely produced in hardback with a clear structure to the text and good integration of high quality photographs, plans and illustrations, it is a pleasure to read. This is a point worth making because not all project reports reach this standard and it reflects well on Cotswold Archaeology's evident commitment to realising the research potential of the projects they undertake.

The contents deal with the prehistoric archaeology along a 9.5 km corridor, 40–60 m wide, in Camarthenshire; the more recent archaeology being separated out to be published subsequently in *Archaeology in Wales*.

The principal findings along the road corridor were two clusters of Early Neolithic pits and a possible Early Neolithic building, an area of Bronze Age funerary activity along a 300m stretch, a possible Bronze Age corn drier and a burnt mound – the last of these an almost ubiquitous find from recent developer-led projects in Wales! Missing from the mix was any significant Late Neolithic material, a fact which the authors speculate might be related to the off-putting presence of the Vaynor henge situated just a few hundred metres from the development. Nonetheless, the archaeology which was discovered produced impressive assemblages of Early Neolithic and Early Bronze Age pottery, a large collection of Early Bronze Age cremated bone, and a wide range of plant macrofossils and charcoal. Radiocarbon dating was applied to this material with great effect, bringing chronological clarity to the findings. All of these contributions are significant additions to available corpora and will make this volume an essential resource for specialists working in western Britain.

The Early Neolithic site include pits containing pottery, stone axe fragments, artefacts made from Group VIII rock, flints and charred plants, including cereals and wild foods. Sarah Cobain's specialist report makes clear that the wild component dominates the assemblage, thereby making a valuable contribution to the debate as to the relative importance of these two components in Neolithic diets. Andrew Mudd's closing discussion explores the Neolithic material in more detail in an attempt to see whether it provides evidence for structured deposition. He concludes that it does. The suggestion that the site contained an Early Neolithic post-built structure is likely to prove more contentious, although the case is well-made with much of the published Welsh evidence brought in in support. For myself I understand the desire to identify buildings – particularly in south Wales which has not benefited from the number of discoveries recently made at north Wallian sites (ie, Llanfaethlu, Rees & Jones 2017; Parc Bryn Cegin, Kenney 2008; Parc Cybi, Kenney *et al.* 2011) – but I don't think this, or the other recent find at Cwmifor (Barber & Hart 2015), make the grade. More importantly though, the evidence is here, it's well presented, and will allow others to make up their own minds.

The Bronze Age funerary activity is presented as the centrepiece of the volume. It was focused on a barrow (now ploughed away), an adjacent pyre area, and further cremations to the west. Thirty-eight intentional deposits of cremated bone were recovered, 24 associated with the barrow and five with the pyre area, accompanying some of these were a total of 10 Collared Urns, a Biconical Urn (rare in south Wales), and five accessory vessels. The presentation of these finds (Chapter 3) provides a masterclass in clarity, with concise text presented in a standardised format, with clear illustrations. The treatment of the cremated bone by Sharon Clough is also very thorough with good discussion of the results for those of us who aren't equipped to decipher the detail of the many tables that support her analysis. The discovery of one, apparently complete, cremation which had been subjected to pyre temperatures approaching 1600°C is particularly noteworthy, being much higher than the temperature one might anticipate based on available experimental data.

Radiocarbon analysis is also used to good effect by Frances Healy, Sarah Cobain and Elaine Dunbar, in their treatment of the barrow chronology. In their preferred model the complex begins around 2015–1900 cal BC and ends 1730–1595 cal BC, with the Collared Urns being deposited in the early part of this sequence and unurned cremations continuing after. Intriguingly they also present a model that accounts for the potential uptake of older carbon from the pyre fuel (a potential contaminant which could result in overestimates of the age of the sample) into the bone apatite carbonate; happily, they conclude that it makes little difference to the finished results, with most dates only showing a difference of around 20 years.

While the Bronze Age funerary activity is the star of the volume, I think the discovery of a possible Middle Bronze Age corn drier deserves fanfare as well. This intriguing feature appears to have had a high temperature fire lit in its central channel, which was raked out from one end, and fed heat through to the other. A radiocarbon date of 1520–1410 cal BC was returned from alder/hazel charcoal found in the basal fill. This feature's morphology certainly matches that of other proven corn driers of more recent date but to find an example so old is unique in Wales (although not in Ireland, as Mudd notes). So, is it a corn drier? Here the waters become murkier, for no plant macrofossils were found in the fills. Arguments are presented which might explain their absence but, ultimately, the absence of proof shouts louder. Nonetheless, an important discovery that awaits future more definitive parallels in Wales.

The final feature of the volume is a Bronze Age burnt mound containing two unlined troughs. No archaeological report from South Wales would be complete without one!

As a narrative of discoveries made this volume does its job admirably but for many specialists its value will rest in the ease with which they can extract the material relevant to their expertise. For myself, I used the data in this volume to add to my databases of radiocarbon dates and plant macrofossils from Wales and the Borders. This required moving between the site summary table (1.2), the radiocarbon table (2.1), and tracking specific contexts within the excavation narrative and each of the specialist reports. In some reports this can be slow and tiresome, but the use of tables throughout all but the lithic and ceramic reports made the task straightforward. My only regret is not to see the inclusion of the very helpful context summary tables which have been a feature of Cotswold Archaeology's grey literature reports in recent years.

So, are there other areas which could have been improved? A few. I noticed the occasional typo which raised a smile but didn't detract from my reading of the text. There is a misplaced boundary line in one of the plant macrofossil tables which caused a momentary confusion but nothing more serious. A table to accompany the discussion of the charcoal from site 26 (the cremation deposits) would also have been welcome. My grumble about the volume, if I have to have one, is just a reflection on the same problem that I think all us specialists suffer from – keeping up with the pace of finds so that our discussions reflects the current state of the archaeological landscape. It's notable that the main references drawn on in the discussion of the prehistoric pottery from the site are both catalogues relating to a specific museum's collection (Savory 1980 and Burrow 2003), and don't reflect the totality of data available from Wales, neither at the time of publication, and certainly not subsequently. This distinction became lost at one point 'Burrow's (2003, 53, fig. 19) distribution map for Early Neolithic pottery from Wales' (p.68) is in fact, just a map showing the finds stored in a single museum and not the results of a nationwide survey. This misunderstanding aside, my point is perhaps more a call-to-arms to a future generation of

students for the production of accessible corpora of finds' assemblages than a specific criticism of the excellent work done to bring this volume so successfully to print.

## References

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Steve Burrow

Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales

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