



Book Reviews

CHALK HILL. NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE DISCOVERIES AT RAMSGATE, KENT BY PETER CLARK, GRANT SHAND AND JAKE WEEKES

Sidestone Press. 2019. 282 pages, 99 maps, plans and drawings, 18 black & white and colour photographs, pb, ISBN 978-90-8890-607-7, €39.95 (also available to read for free via the publisher's website)

As many readers will be acutely aware, the journey towards the publication of a major project often proves more protracted and difficult than it appears at the outset, and the principal authors of this book are to be congratulated for reaching the end of just such a voyage. In 1997–8, construction of a new road serving the port at Ramsgate, on the former Isle of Thanet, prompted a series of investigations by Canterbury Archaeological Trust. These culminated in the excavation of a broad transect across a suite of features that initially seemed to represent Kent's first confirmed Neolithic causewayed enclosure (Shand 1998). It was apparently a rather complex example, with at least three approximately concentric arcs of conjoining pits, which were at that time assumed to be parts of more-or-less complete circuits. One indication of how far our expectations have advanced during the lifetime of this project is that today it comes as a profound disappointment that the now-standard application of Bayesian black arts (pp.78–85) has, in this instance, been unable to offer a chronological model that distinguishes between the three arcs of features, due to a dearth of suitable samples in the Inner and Middle Arcs. The early Neolithic features were overlain by a fairly typical array of later prehistoric remains, including a Bronze Age ring-ditch and a presumed domestic enclosure dating to the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age, but it is unquestionably the early Neolithic complex which steals the show.

Some of the features in question had first been identified in 1975 by CUCAP (the Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography) and the cropmarks were plotted in 1996 by the RCHME (Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England) and interpreted on that evidence as a possible causewayed enclosure. In 1999, following discussion with the excavation's field director, Grant Shand, I prepared an illustration comparing the RCHME's plot of the cropmarks with the eventual excavation plan (Oswald *et al.* 2001, fig. 4.2). This was primarily intended to highlight the pros and cons of aerial survey: namely that while this technique often allows a provisional interpretation of the character, extent and likely date of a given site, it seldom offers a complete or detailed picture. I looked in vain for some acknowledgement of this history of investigation in this book's introduction and was slightly

puzzled to read (on p.55) that 'The cropmark evidence was plotted in relation to the excavated evidence at a fairly late stage during these studies' (my emphasis). That may be, but the plot produced by Alison Deegan in 2009 differs only in minor ways from the one published in 2001.

Two hundred and thirty-odd pages of the book are dedicated to feature descriptions and specialist reports, which may seem daunting to a general reader. Some of the descriptive writing is made less accessible by instances of poor punctuation and awkward syntax; similar minor problems, which should have been removed by good copy-editing, occur even in the introductory summary (p.15). There are, however, some very interesting sections: the unusual presence of considerable volumes of burnt flint and shellfish are two individual points to which Jake Weekes returns in his discussion of the evidence (Chapter 5). The plans and section drawings are clear and consistent throughout, in many cases conveying the complexity of the deposits more eloquently than the accompanying text. Commendably, the digital version, which can be read for free on the publisher's website, retains this clarity, even when the illustrations are enlarged to more than twice the intended size.

The reward for a general reader's patience in working through the early sections of the book comes in the form of Peter Clark's 13-page-long discussion (Chapter 6), which is authoritative, thought-provoking and well-written. It addresses several key issues – most notably the continental 'back-story' and the nature of 'Neolithisation' (including interesting parentheses on warfare and diet) – concluding that the evidence from Chalk Hill may be interpreted as 'creolisation'. This argument may be supported by the relatively early date of this particular site (Bayliss *et al.* 2011). In particular, Clark sees the form of the arcs of conjoining pits as a deliberate fusion between the concept of enclosure, representing a backward-looking import from the continental Neolithic, and pit-digging, a mode of behaviour familiar to the indigenous Mesolithic population. The 'back-cover blurb' states: 'However, the monument could not in fact be categorised as a causewayed enclosure, but instead represented a type of early Neolithic ritual monument unique to the British Isles.' My hackles instinctively rise at the use of the phrase 'in fact': this conclusion is, I would argue, a question of interpretation rather than fact. And the certainty displayed on the back cover is arrived at only gradually through the course of the book: the term causewayed enclosure is used frequently, but sometimes within inverted commas and sometimes without, until it eventually emerges as 'The Chalk Hill Pit Complex' (p.214), with Clark questioning whether it is legitimate to assume that the arcs of conjoining pits would necessarily have formed full circuits. Ultimately, one wonders if extensive geophysical survey might cost-effectively address this fundamental question, which has been left unanswered by both the aerial survey and the excavations, as has proved the case with the early Neolithic enclosure at Burham, in north Kent (Oswald *et al.* 2001, fig. 5.20A; Garwood 2012).

Given the severe truncation of the Neolithic features by later ploughing, analyses throughout the book understandably focus on the 'cut features' that survive. No evidence seems to have been recorded for asymmetric fills, which might point to where the upcast from the pit-digging was deposited and, presumably because of this absence of evidence, there is negligible discussion of the role(s) that upstanding earthworks and/or timber superstructures might have played in defining the boundaries. Nevertheless, it has been observed that all 25–30 of the causewayed enclosure circuits that survive as earthworks in the British Isles are accompanied by internal banks and that 'causeways' and more minor interruptions in the ditches tend to be far more numerous than those in the accompanying banks (Oswald *et al.* 2001, 43). More than one authority has suggested that variation in the size and form of ditch segments might be largely irrelevant if their initial function was primarily to provide material for upstanding elements that were more important in terms of the creation of a physical barrier (eg, Piggott 1954, 24; Mercer 1988, 89). Consequently, while I tend to agree with Clark's (p.207) conclusion that gaps between pits or ditch segments were, in most cases, 'fortuitous', the same is not necessarily true of the more infrequent gaps in the banks, which, of course, do not survive in the case of Chalk Hill. Enclosures like those on Knap Hill in Wiltshire and at Barkhale in West Sussex are unusual in having bank and ditch segments that are precisely commensurate with each other, in the case of the former lending the perimeter a self-consciously monumental, arguably even cenotaphic, air. Both Weekes (p.196) and Clark (p.207) ponder how a piecemeal digging process, prolonged over somewhere between two and seven generations, could eventually have resulted in relatively clear linearity, describing arcs (or perhaps complete circuits) that seem to suggest that there was an overall 'design' underpinning the piecemeal process. Perhaps the answer to the conundrum of what guided the pit-diggers is to be found in features that were no longer detectable in the archaeological record on this site: for example marker-posts, established lines of upcast spoil, or even the limit of a woodland clearing.

Echoing Julian Thomas and Chris Evans, Clark asks '... if this monument classification is so loose and so broad that it is of little use in separating these particular sites from the already heterogeneous corpus of Neolithic enclosures in general' (p.207). This view might have been lent support by this reviewer's own most recent contribution to the debate, which has served to amplify the degree of potential heterogeneity still further (Oswald & Edmonds 2021). Yet the utility of any monument classification perhaps depends on how we choose to use it. Even a century ago, this classification was not seen as a 'morphological strait-jacket' (*contra* Waddington 2001), but more as a convenient tag by which to refer to a polythetic set. In this reviewer's opinion, these earliest examples of Neolithic enclosures are undeniably very varied in form, size and location, yet they still have themes in common with each other, more so than they do with the cursuses and henges to which Clark alludes. It will be left up to the reader to

decide whether the features on Chalk Hill really represent a unique type of monument that is clearly distinct from the large and unruly herd of causewayed enclosures, as this book claims.

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Al Oswald, PhD candidate at the University of York

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