



Book Reviews

IRON AGE FORTIFICATION BESIDE THE RIVER LARK: EXCAVATIONS AT MILDENHALL SUFFOLK BY TIM HAVARD, MARY ALEXANDER AND RAY HOLT

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The important Iron Age archaeology described in this volume is alluded to both by its title and by the fantastic cover image of an Iron Age long-handled comb. However, whilst Iron Age archaeology forms a key part of this volume, it tells the wider story of a remarkable multi-period site located at Recreation Way, Mildenhall in Suffolk. Multi-period sites are common in British archaeology, but the occupation of this location almost continuously between the Late Bronze Age and the medieval period has produced an unusually comprehensive record of activity here over more than 2000 years.

Chapter 1 of the volume begins by providing background to the excavations at Recreation Way, which were carried out by Cotswold Archaeology on behalf of J. Sainsbury Ltd ahead of the construction of a new supermarket. Descriptions and images of the site's location, geology and topography illustrate its landscape setting at the edge of the floodplain of the River Lark. A review of the site's archaeological background places it into context with previous archaeological discoveries in Mildenhall and summarises previous investigations at the site itself. This is followed by a summary of the site's historical background, which focuses on the foundation and development of Mildenhall, a town that saw its first written reference in the charter of Edward the Confessor. Chapter 1 closes with sections on the methodology employed during fieldwork and post-excavation work; the aims of the report; and information on dating methods and the phasing structure used in the subsequent chapters.

The archaeology revealed at Recreation Way is described in Chapter 2. This part of the volume presents a series of period narratives, which describe archaeological features and deposits and also mention relevant finds, environmental evidence and radiocarbon

dates. It summarises a substantial quantity of archaeological data and presents the site's narrative in a concise and comprehensible way, aided by a series of effective plans, section drawings and photographs. Arguably, Chapter 2 is best read in conjunction with Chapter 6, where further interpretation of the site and its features can be found.

The site's archaeology has been divided into nine periods, spanning the Late Mesolithic to the post-medieval period. Period 1 represents the earliest archaeological evidence from the site (Earlier prehistoric periods and palaeochannel, Late Mesolithic/Early Neolithic: c. 6500–3000BC), while activity during Period 2 (Late Bronze Age: c. 1000–800 BC) was centered on a large pit, which is later discussed in Chapter 6 as a probable waterhole. Periods 3 (Middle Iron Age c. 350–50 BC) and 4 (Late Iron Age c. 50 BC–AD 50) represent the majority of the archaeological evidence from the site. Most notably, this phase of activity included a pair of massive Middle Iron Age ditches delineating one corner of an enclosure on the site's higher ground and an even larger Late Iron Age ditch dug directly to the east. Additional Period 3 and 4 features included pits, a corn dryer and a hearth, containing a wealth of Iron Age finds and environmental evidence, with a lack of evidence for structures leading to the suggestion that an area of habitation may have been located beyond the area of excavation. Period 5 covers Roman activity dating from c. AD 70–400, which consisted of a series of agricultural enclosures and other features related to the agricultural exploitation of the both the higher ground and floodplain, in addition to four inhumation burials. Taken together, this Roman evidence is suggestive of an area peripheral to a settlement. The site continued to serve various functions relating to agriculture and activities peripheral to settlement during Period 6 (Saxon: c. 6th–11th centuries), Period 7 (Medieval: c. later 11th–16th centuries) and Period 8 (Post-medieval: c. 16th–19th centuries), with an attempt to reclaim land from the floodplain occurring during Period 7. The final section of Chapter 2 comprises a grave catalogue detailing the contexts of the human remains found in Period 3, 4, 5 and 6 features.

Chapter 3 comprises a brief chapter on documentary evidence, focusing on written and cartographic evidence for the development of the town of Mildenhall during the medieval and post-medieval periods and the site's location next to the River Lark. Whilst the information in this chapter is valuable, it could perhaps have been integrated into the historical background given in Chapter 1, the latter parts of the period narrative given in Chapter 2, or the discussion in Chapter 6 so that the site's archaeological and

documentary evidence could have been discussed in parallel, whilst maintaining the overall flow and structure of the volume.

One of the highlights of this site's archaeology, from this author's perspective, is the finds assemblage, which includes a significant Iron Age contingent. Chapter 4 presents the artefact reports produced by individual specialist contributors, with 11 reports in total. Like the overall volume, this section is organised in a traditional archaeological manner, making it straightforward to navigate for those familiar with this format, and the finds reports are each accompanied by high quality, clear illustrations. The decorated Iron Age pottery from the site is particularly noteworthy and the discussion of this material by Matt Brudenell is enlightening (Section VII. with a contribution from R. Ixer). Other notable elements within Chapter 4 include the first large assemblage of medieval pottery excavated from Mildenhall (Section IX. by Sue Anderson) and a rich assemblage of Iron Age worked bone objects, including a range of toggles, craft/textile tools and trial pieces, many of which are decorated (Section XI. By E.R. McSloy).

Chapter 5, similarly to Chapter 4, includes a series of nine reports on the site's zooarchaeological and environmental evidence, including sections on radiocarbon and archaeomagnetic dating, which provide a generous array of absolute dates for the site. The reports in this chapter add valuable detail to understandings of the site at Recreation Way as a location for pastoral agriculture throughout much of its occupation sequence, also suggesting the exploitation of local natural resources and providing rich information on the area's vegetation history. Of note in this chapter is a nationally important insect assemblage relating to the site's medieval deposits and representing the only archaeoentomological assemblage from East Anglia deriving from rural medieval deposits (Section VI. By David Smith).

The site's archaeology is discussed and synthesised in Chapter 6, the book's final chapter. This chapter answers many of the questions that arose during the description of the site's archaeology in Chapter 2. The discussion of the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age periods by Andrew Mudd (Section I.) begins with the large Late Bronze Age pit at the site, which Mudd interprets as a probable waterhole, referring to comparative examples and considering its relationship with potential nearby settlement. The Middle Iron Age evidence is then discussed, with a focus on the double-ditched enclosure, which is interpreted as having been rectangular in form. Mudd refers to the enclosure as a 'fort' in

acknowledgement of the huge size of its ditches, and draws comparisons with other East Anglian examples of large-ditched enclosures. Mudd writes that whilst a number of large Middle and Late Iron Age enclosures are known in East Anglia, they have not received a huge amount of archaeological attention and are not generally well dated. Perhaps the new find at Mildenhall presents an opportunity to reassess this evidence and further explore Mudd's discussion around whether these sites reflect regional political concerns or local developments.

Chapter 6 goes on to discuss the evidence from the fort's interior and the intriguing find of the skull and first two cervical vertebrae of an adult male in a cut in the fill of one of the enclosure ditches, with suggestions that these remains were manipulated following at least partial decomposition and may represent a non-violent decapitation some time after death, rather than an execution. The large Late Iron Age ditch is discussed as a replacement for the fort, dug shortly after its decline, and the idea of this ditch as suggestive of the site's status, perhaps as a territorial oppidum, is discussed.

The later periods of activity at the site are examined by Neil Holbrook (Section II. The Late Iron Age and Roman Periods) and Mary Alexander (Section III. The Saxon Period; Section IV. Medieval) with discussion based on themes such as agricultural exploitation, the potential for nearby settlement and proximity to the River Lark. To conclude the volume's final chapter, Mary Alexander looks broadly across the site's occupation history to provide an enlightening discussion of continuity and change, focusing on the themes of topography and environment; the economy; and the site's changing character and significance (Section V.).

Overall, this volume is packed with detailed and well-presented information on a remarkable archaeological site, arranged in a way that will be familiar to its archaeological readership. Although cross-referencing between different chapters is sometimes slightly challenging, it is accessibly written and the text is clear and concise. It is, arguably, best read as a whole volume, to gain the full benefit of taking in both the descriptive and interpretative chapters, as well as the detail added by the specialist reports. However, it will also prove useful for those who wish to dip into specific aspects of the site, particularly the finds and environmental evidence and the wider discussion of the site's regional context. This volume will undoubtedly influence ideas about the Middle–Late Iron Age in

East Anglia, and it will be fantastic to see some of the points from Chapter 6 of the volume expanded upon in future studies.

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