



Book Reviews

CLIFFS END FARM ISLE OF THANET, KENT. A MORTUARY AND RITUAL SITE OF THE BRONZE AGE, IRON AGE AND ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD WITH EVIDENCE FOR LONG-DISTANCE MARITIME MOBILITY BY JAQUELINE I. MCKINLEY, MATT LEIVERS, JÖRN SCHUSTER, PETER MARSHALL, ALISTAIR J. BARCLAY AND NICK STOODLEY

Wessex Archaeology, Salisbury 2014. 318pp, 159 figs incl 49 colour and B&W pls, 64 tables, ISBN 9781874350705, hb, £35

This impressive volume details the results of excavations at Cliffs End Farm on the Isle of Thanet in Kent. The site has produced a series of well-preserved mortuary deposits from the Late Bronze Age to the Middle Iron Age. Human remains from these periods are rare, but existing finds suggest that the bodies of the dead were subject to a range of funerary and ritual practices. These practices are relatively poorly understood, however, and few assemblages have been the subject of detailed scientific analyses. The substantial group of articulated, semi-articulated, disarticulated and fragmentary remains from Cliffs End Farm therefore presents an unprecedented opportunity to understand not only the diverse ways in which the bodies of the dead were treated during these periods, but also provides insights into the role of Thanet – uniquely placed at the junction of the North Sea and the English Channel – in articulating inter-regional connections between Britain and Europe.

Chapter 1 describes the project aims and methodology, and sets the site within its local archaeological context. Already during the Early Bronze Age, Thanet was a focus of intensive mortuary activity, with the construction of dense concentrations of round barrows; the current site incorporates part of one such cluster of monuments. Excavated as part of this project, no human remains survived from these barrows, although an assemblage of high-quality flint from one of the graves indicates interesting regional specificities in the types of flint objects that accompanied Early Bronze Age burials. The results of the excavations of the barrows and later features are detailed in Chapter 2, focusing in particular on the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age archaeology. This later prehistoric sequence starts with the construction of three ditched enclosures in the 10th century BC. These produced animal bone, cereal-processing waste, pottery, quern stones, metalworking waste and worked bone, amongst other things – none of which would be out of place in a 'typical' Late Bronze Age settlement context. However, the lack of roundhouses, and the character of some of the finds (notably the animal bone assemblage), suggest that these enclosures may have had a ceremonial (and specifically a feasting) role rather than purely a domestic function – a role that may relate to the deposits of human bone elsewhere on the site.

Immediately to the east of these enclosures, a substantial 'mortuary feature' was identified. This consisted of a linear depression, some 29 m wide and at least 52 m long. At the base of this, and cut into its fills, were a series of deposits of human bone. Most notable amongst these was burial pit 3666, which was the focus of Late Bronze Age activity. The first of the articulated bodies to be deposited in this pit was that of an elderly female: she lay on her left hand side, with one hand holding a piece of chalk by her face and the other apparently 'pointing' towards one of the three enclosures. A pair of neonatal lambs had been placed over her pelvis. This link between the bodies of humans and animals is seen in a second subadult female, whose head was laid on a cattle skull. The bodies of two children in this feature had seen interesting post-mortem manipulation. One had been placed prone: most of the skull and right hand were missing, and the removal of these bones appears to have taken place soon after deposition of the body. The

skull of a second juvenile had been twisted round – presumably once decomposition had begun to take place – to face half of a pot that had been placed behind the head. The lack of evidence for backfilling and recutting of burial pit 3666 suggests that it may have been left open for a period of time to facilitate the manipulation of these bodies. Other bodily manipulation probably occurred at least in part outside mortuary pit 3666, for example as in the case of the semi-articulated skull, spine and upper left limb of an adult male that had been arranged as a ‘bundle’ and then deposited in this feature. Like the elderly female, this was accompanied by a possible grave good – a composite item of copper and bone interpreted as a pendant; grave goods are virtually absent from the few known burials of Late Bronze Age date, so this is a highly unusual find. Various disarticulated bones were recovered from the upper fills of burial pit 3666; radiocarbon dating indicates that several of these are older than the elderly female at the base of the pit, hinting at tantalising evidence for complex forms of curation, while the preponderance of skull and right femur fragments suggests an element of selection. Further deposits around the edge of the pit included a series of five cattle skulls. Finally, a small ring-ditch was constructed around the pit, perhaps as a closing event.

One of the most extraordinary features of the site is that after a gap of three or four centuries, the large ‘mortuary feature’ became the focus of burial once again, first at the end of the Early Iron Age, when two complete inhumations were deposited in graves to the south of burial pit 3666, and then in the Middle Iron Age. The Middle Iron Age remains include six articulated burials, most in distinct grave cuts. Again, some interesting relationships with animal remains can be discerned: the remains of a possible dog pelt were found some 3 m east of one grave, while in grave 3665, the body of a subadult male was laid over the partial remains of a horse. The variety of evidence for post-mortem manipulation in Late Bronze Age burial pit 3666 is not matched in the Early Iron Age or Middle Iron Age deposits, although disarticulated human bone dating to both of these periods was recovered from the mortuary feature.

Subsequent Chapters 3, 4 and 5 set out the results of a variety of post-excavation analyses. 105 radiocarbon dates as well as isotope analysis were funded by English Heritage. The dating evidence indicates that the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age mortuary deposits represent two well-separated, short-lived phases of activity, each lasting no more than just 2–3 generations; this makes the use of the mortuary feature for similar purposes several centuries apart all the more remarkable, for it raises a series of interesting questions regarding the workings of collective memory and the meaning of place. Dating of residues from ceramic vessels also proves valuable, providing a refined chronology for the Late Bronze Age pottery recovered from the site, and placing certain decorated forms firmly in the 9th century, considerably earlier than previously thought.

Osteoarchaeological and isotope analysis of the human bone proves equally interesting, with a variety of useful information recorded relating to stature, non-metric traits, trauma and disease, amongst other things – we learn, for example, that the individuals buried at Cliffs End Farm suffered from a range of infections and parasites, including tapeworm. Detailed attention to the bone also provides insights into formation processes. The disarticulated bone provides some evidence for exposure, notably in the loss of trabecular bone, the presence of longitudinal fissures and occasional canid gnawing, and slight bleaching of some of the remains: the paucity of formal burials in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age has often been thought to indicate that bodies were exposed to the elements, although positive evidence for this has rarely been sought. A greenish precipitate observed on several of the disarticulated bones suggests they were originally deposited in a waterlogged environment before being redeposited in their final location; interestingly, some of these were skull fragments that may originally have belonged to the Late Bronze Age child whose skull and right hand were missing. Ageing and sexing data indicates an unexpectedly high proportion of subadults, and more females than males – suggesting that the rites enacted on the Cliffs End Farm individuals may have been reserved for people belonging to particular social categories. Indeed, the elderly female buried at the base of pit 3666 had several sword blows to the back of the head; osteological evidence for weapon trauma is highly unusual in the Bronze Age. The age and sex of this individual, the lack of evidence for self-defence

(there were no sword blows to her arms), and the careful placement of her body as the first of a group of unusual burials, suggests that she may have been a sacrificial victim rather than a victim of warfare. Perhaps most extraordinary, however, are the results of the strontium and oxygen isotope analyses: these indicate that those buried at Cliffs End Farm, both in the Late Bronze Age and subsequent periods, were of diverse origins, with a significant proportion of non-local individuals identified as potentially from Scandinavia and the Western Mediterranean.

Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the significance of the site, and contributions from a variety of authors ensure a refreshing variety of different perspectives and interpretations. Jacqueline McKinley, for example, noting the presence of several paired deposits of neonatal lambs in mortuary pit 3666, suggests that the individuals buried in this feature may have been killed in springtime as a component of fertility rites. Stuart Needham, in contrast, points to the geographically-significant location of Thanet at the junction of several major seaways to argue that they may have been sacrificed to ensure success in long-distance travels and exchange; the choice of foreign sacrificial victims, he suggests, may have been a way of illustrating and claiming control over a diverse range of long-distance networks. Finally, Chapter 7 details the Anglo-Saxon cemetery that developed in and around the Early Bronze Age barrows many centuries later, and provides an interesting discussion on the politics of re-using earlier funerary monuments – a practice that has been widely recognised for the Anglo-Saxon period.

Overall, then, this is a hugely significant addition to existing literature on Late Bronze Age and Iron Age mortuary practice and provides fascinating insights into the character, scale and significance of long-distance movements during these periods. It is beautifully-produced, and combines both detailed presentation of the primary data with high-level analysis and interpretation. My main criticism of the volume is that there is a tendency to overemphasise the apparently unique character of the mortuary evidence. In fact, a significant percentage of excavated Late Bronze Age sites have produced partial and disarticulated human remains that hint at complex forms of post-mortem manipulation; although Cliff's End Farm is relatively unusual in the quantity of human remains found within a single feature, the sorts of things that happened to these bodies can certainly be paralleled elsewhere during this period. The key difference at this site is that the evidence has been subject to detailed scientific analysis and it is to be hoped that the results of this productive research will encourage further work elsewhere on the manipulation of human remains during the Bronze Age and Iron Age.

Joanna Brück
University of Bristol

Review submitted: January 2017

The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor