



Book Reviews

GRISTHORPE MAN: A LIFE AND DEATH IN THE BRONZE AGE EDITED BY C. J. KNÜSEL

Oxford, Oxbow Books 2013. 217pp, 49 b&w figs, 83 colour (including 1 frontispiece, p.ii), 12 tables (+ another 7 tables in the chapter appendices) ISBN 978 1 78297 207 5, hb, £50.00

The book brings together the results of a suite of studies that contributed to the Gristhorpe Man Project (2005-2008) which sought to revisit this rare assemblage of exceptionally well-preserved finds constituting an Early Bronze Age tree-trunk burial, replete with its occupant's skeletal remains and associated inorganic and organic grave goods. These discoveries were made in the early nineteenth century in Yorkshire, on the northeast coast of Great Britain. Although the title may suggest a very specific focus on this individual's human remains, the publication spans a wide range of topics covering their original discovery, the context of initial antiquarian interpretations, a summary of comparative British log coffin sites, recent fieldwork at the original site; not to mention significant new detailed scientific analyses of the human remains and the artefacts associated with them and, last but not least, exemplar research possibilities of antiquated osteobiological data.

The contents are broadly split into four main themes. The first section provides background information on the discovery of the Gristhorpe tree-trunk burial in 1834 and considers the subject of tree-trunk/log coffin burials in the UK in general (Chapters 1 to 3). An overview of the accounts pertaining to the excavation, recovery and early publication of Gristhorpe Man is included; and in Chapter 2 Rowley-Conwy gives an interesting account of how Gristhorpe Man fitted within early interpretative frameworks and its significance in the development of archaeological thought and initial broad chronologies for the prehistory, most notably its influence on the take-up of Thomsen's Three Age system in British archaeology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In Chapter 4 Parker Pearson then situates the Gristhorpe discovery amongst the wider evidence for tree-trunk and log coffin burials in Britain by focussing on the structural elements of such burials and the individuals contained within them. There is some overlap here with the fourth section of the book (themed on the grave contents), particularly Chapter 12, but on the whole, the two chapters (4 and 12) do complement each other.

Whilst a more complete (and possibly visual) summary of the range and regional diversity of Early Bronze Age funerary practices in the UK compared to the phenomenon of tree-trunk burials would have been welcome, as the author notes, this publication would not have accommodated an exhaustive overview. Parker Pearson also approaches some of the interpretations regarding the use of a tree-trunk as a burial container and the motivations for inclusion of the various grave goods recorded. Here, there is a slight bias towards the possibility of deliberate links between tree-trunk burials and log boats, which does not feel justified in this reviewer's opinion, though Parker Pearson does balance his overall argument with reference to Mowat's scepticism (of similar Scottish data) of any appropriate comparison (Mowat 1996).

The second themed section reports on recent fieldwork (carried out between 2006 and 2008) at the original barrow site, from which Gristhorpe Man was exhumed. This work constituted geophysical survey incorporating a variety of techniques, in addition to a small evaluation trench and a programme of scientific dating (including AMS radiocarbon and dendrochronology) on selected samples from the tree-trunk coffin and its contents. The results of the geophysical survey and evaluation excavation have clearly helped to reveal more of the complexity of the burial mound in which Gristhorpe Man's tree trunk was interred, details of which appear to have been overlooked or missed by his original excavators. Chapter 7, which discusses results of the dating programme, is very concise and clearly demonstrates the potential for the coordinated application of multiple dating techniques, along with a good, sound and considered, sampling strategy, to provide increasingly precise and reliable information regarding the dating of events and their sequencing of this particular find. The limitations of the techniques and their results are also explained well and while the dendrochronological sequence for the Gristhorpe tree-trunk burial is currently unable to be fitted into the overall chronological record for the locality, it certainly has demonstrated the potential to contribute to future research as new sequences arise and comparative discoveries are made.

The third theme concentrates on the actual physical human remains. Knüsel and his co-authors (Chapter 8) take an osteobiographical approach, not dissimilar to the forensic work on the St. Bees' Lady (Knüsel et al, 2010), but this time applies both standard and non-standard techniques in an extremely thorough assessment of how to approach the study of a prehistoric individual. It is clear there is a lot to learn, even from just a single set of human remains. The combination of CT scanning and apparent 3D printing of its results is particularly impressive, allowing as it does the much improved observation of the pathological changes inside the cranium and consequently revealing great potential for our understanding of such changes and Gristhorpe Man's general health at the time of his death.

The results of the Raman spectroscopy again show the potential for new techniques to add to our knowledge, even after 180 years since Gristhorpe Man's discovery; resolving the mystery of the supposed 'mistletoe berries' originally reported by Williamson (1834, 10).

Montgomery and Gledhill's chapter on diet and origins (Chapter 10) stands out as an excellent example of the potential for stable isotope research to provide useful information on these aspects of an individual's life cycle. What was unexpected was the potential of these techniques to provide more subtle data with which to resolve more specific questions regarding Gristhorpe Man, particularly those surrounding his conservation since recovery and indeed considers also whether the original remains had in fact been substituted with a nineteenth century skeleton. The authors have done a superb job of explaining their sampling strategy and the motivations behind it as well as describing their methods clearly and concisely in a very accessible and engaging account, although this reviewer raises an eyebrow at the suggestion of a "pristine and salubrious Yorkshire".

The fourth and final theme in the book focuses on the artefacts found with Gristhorpe Man and includes new analyses and interpretations and a thorough investigation of the taphonomy and conservation practices employed by both the original excavators, the assemblage's subsequent curators, and throughout the recent Gristhorpe Man Project, to accommodate the various studies involved. The latter is a particularly useful steer for those looking to carry out future analyses on curated human remains, by providing a thorough appraisal of issues arising from Gristhorpe Man's historic conservation and curation.

Perhaps the only missing element which might have been considered could have been the inclusion of a complete transcript of Williamson's original publication in 1834 (assuming this

was feasible). The majority of the chapters refer to, if not quote, significant segments of Williamson's developing account of the excavation in the early 19th century, but it would have been certainly interesting to have had available the initial account of the find in order to gain a deeper impression of the contemporary feelings and reaction to the discovery.

It should be noted that the production of this book feels slightly rushed, given the number of typing errors and occasional grammatical glitches across several different chapters as well as the rather uninspiring layout of images overall. Some of the images, (e.g. those within the more specialist chapters such as the osteoarchaeology), also lack annotation such as arrows or highlighted areas which would have aided the less well informed reader to identify aspects referred to within the text. Where these are present they sometimes appear inconsistent or hand-drawn. These are copy-editing issues which could have been very easily resolved and would have helped make the material more accessible to a wider audience.

As quoted in the final chapter by Melton et al., the late Paul Ashbee's forward-looking words on the significance of the Gristhorpe Man burial, its contents and how they would "repay study and definitive publication" (Ashbee, 1960, 89) stated over 50 years ago, have finally been addressed. This synthesis of the wide spectrum of scientific and historic investigations incorporated within the Gristhorpe Man Project holds up as a key stepping stone towards our developing knowledge of Bronze Age burial practices in the UK.

Furthermore, the project and its publication clearly demonstrate the continuing importance of revisiting similar early archaeological discoveries in the future. Whilst it shows that at least some validation of the broad conclusions of the burial's original investigators to be justified, this new work highlights the importance of informed conservation and the value of retention of human remains in the long term, not only for the potential of the fresh insights which new and emerging approaches can yield, but also as Rowley-Conwy's account in Chapter 2 explores, the development of scientific thought and practice as applied to archaeology and the social context in which principles key to archaeological thought evolved and were accepted.

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