



Book Reviews

THE GWITHIAN LANDSCAPE: MOLLUSCS AND ARCHAEOLOGY ON CORNISH SAND DUNES BY THOMAS M. WALKER

Oxford, Archaeopress 2018 105pp, 172, figs (all colour), 39 tables, pb, ISBN 978-1-78491-803-3, £38.00

Gwithian: we all know about this site (excavated by Charles Thomas in the 1940s–1960s) from our undergraduate days ... a staple of the Bronze Age (or Beaker Period) of many a text book, but sadly never fully published. Recent work by Jacky Nowakowski and colleagues have overturned the dating of some of those key features: structures, plough and spade marks in the sand, but much of that excellent work still languishes as massive works of grey literature. This book is not that long-awaited publication. It is a book on the molluscs (land snails) and archaeology of the dunes, and yes it is distilled from a PhD thesis. So why do you want to read about some specialist aspect of one of Britain's key (unpublished) archaeological sites; especially when PhD theses are specifically written to impress examiners and demonstrate research ability, rather than convey archaeological information in a readable narrative?

What Tom Walker does here is to look at, and essentially dissect, the distribution of the sand dunes around Gwithian and Godrevy to map the landscape, then selectively undertake palaeo-environmental analysis, principally though not wholly, land snails, to put that dune accumulation into the land-use history. And no, this is not just another palaeo-environmental piece of research. Because this research was undertaken under the guidance of Professor Martin Bell at Reading (who can be seen assisting the coring in Fig. 34), the cultural archaeology is dovetailed and spliced into the environmental research throughout the book.

A number of previous excavations and cuttings had recovered and reported land snails, to which Walker added his own small sondages. Walker attempts to review all of this data (snail numbers are extraordinarily high in most sequences/samples), and tie them together with his own coring and sediment profiling to create a more unified picture of sand accumulation, and the environment and land-use history. Obviously, land snails were the main palaeo-environmental proxy, but pollen and soil micromorphology analyses were performed from the author's excavation by his Reading colleagues (Batchelor and Banerjea). The sand is not only extensive, but reaches thickness in excess of 6 metres!

The slim volume covers a review of the archaeology of Gwithian (Beaker to medieval) in 12 pages (a welcome summary for all archaeologists), reviews previous molluscan analyses at Gwithian (including that of Penny Spincer summarised in her seminal paper in the CBA volume on the *Effect of Man on the Landscape: the highland zone* (1975)), then launches into his own study; coring (three chapters), GPR, excavations, molluscs, pollen (by Batchelor) and soil science (particle size, pH, XRF), micromorphology (by Banerjea). He concludes with aspects of mining (chapter 13) and its geochemical impact, and a discussion (Chapter 14) completely reviewing the development of the Gwithian landscape from Mesolithic to medieval and recent, and ending with notes of a few specific topics: sea level, mining, mollusc extinctions and introductions.

The book is bright – all 172 figures are in colour – even graphs and mollusc histograms; the analyses are well presented; the molluscan analysis is masterly and well presented (greatly helped by the coloured histograms). The author presents his own data (an astonishing 22 mollusc histograms, if I've counted correctly) and the accompanying data tables, but when redrawing the important snail diagrams of others (some of which is unpublished student data), he failed to similarly present the mollusc tables; an incompleteness that is unfortunate.

The author's testpit excavation and recovery of bovid or ovicaprid foot prints is important, the clear new dates of the main buried soils and sand blow (eg, Figs 132 and 133) start to unpick this complex landscape. There are editorial errors (as in every book), but on the whole these don't detract from reading – though one might like to know which Nowakowski 2007 (a or b) volume is referenced on page 14 before wading through the wrong one! Despite the mass of good archaeological science, the end product is one of an archaeological understanding of a developing and transforming landscape. Not every reader will want to wade through all of the detail, and the index is too summary to be of great help. The book presents an excellent summary of the palaeo-environmental (and archaeological) work at Gwithian-Godrey, but still bears some of the hall marks of a thesis ... – although illustrated in colour throughout, there are a few superfluous figures to the general reader, such as crushed shells, (Fig. 36), of a standard coring head (Fig. 35) and the Intrax core scanner (Fig. 39) – just a shot of a lab! Although the contents look well structured, it is actually quite hard to pick out some specific points of information.

At the end of the day, although Walker correlated the episodes of sand blow with settlement activity (or inactivity), he did not really tackle the problem of how much sand blow deposition was engendered or accelerated by human action (and what specific activities this might have been), and how much could be attributed to climate and purely non-anthropogenic 'natural' climatic effect. It might have been useful to have shown his cored profiled presented early in the

volume (Fig. 48), perhaps dissected schematically and interpretative with explanation or suggestion of any anthropogenic engendered phases of sand accumulation (or loss and winnowing). Although Walker documents sand blow around Britain's shores, and especially in the south-west, he did not take the opportunity to explore the relationship, or even note the presence, of similarly impressive deposits in north-west France.

Overall, despite the specialist nature of the volume it is well produced, colour throughout, and is a well written and presented piece of research, showcasing environmental archaeology as a clear and major adjunct to, and within, archaeology. It provides an excellent re-articulation of the Gwithian landscape, and is a must buy for anyone interested in the archaeology of this landscape.

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