



## Book Reviews

### **DEATH AND BURIAL IN IRON AGE BRITAIN BY DW HARDING**

*Oxford University Press. Oxford. 2016. 328 pp. 65 figs incl 7 photographs. ISBN 978-0-19-968756-5, hb, £70*

The burial record of the British Iron Age has long confused, excited and frustrated archaeologists in equal measure. In recent years, new developments have reinvigorated debate over this material, with the recognition that more cemeteries existed than we once imagined and reassessments of the dating of burial rites, levels of violence in society and origins of the dead. Discoveries made by developer-funder archaeology, in particular, continue to emphasise the diversity of practices that existed across Britain, both temporally and geographically. Despite the recent publication of many excellent regional analyses, Dennis Harding's book fills an important gap in the literature, providing the first comprehensive overview. This volume marks the fifth in his recent sequence of books on the British Iron Age where he brings his personal perspectives on many of the most important aspects of Iron Age life.

As Emeritus Abercromby Professor of Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh, Harding is well-placed to reflect on Britain as whole, bringing a wealth of experience, having worked on the Iron Age in the Thames Valley, Northeast England and Scotland since the 1960s. Harding has clearly digested an enormous amount of material for this volume, citing many examples from developer-funded archaeology and new research situating these into wider discourse. Chapter 1 sets out the main issues and makes some important points, not least that any attempt to explain the burial record of Britain as the result of a single, regular rite is futile. Here too are discussions on various aspects such as Iron Age social structures and suggested theoretical approaches to the material, most notably a welcome consideration of the relevance of the concept of 'Personhood' to the Iron Age.

The rest of the volume explores different themes and data-sets. Chapter 2 explores mortuary practices and issues with the evidence, followed by an assessment of cemeteries (Chapter 3) then the 'dead in the landscape' (Chapter 4). Specific themes are then examined, including 'Focal and signal burials' (Chapter 5); 'Graves and grave goods' (Chapter 6); violence (Chapter 7) and 'Gender issues' (Chapter 8) followed by an excursion into the burial of animals (Chapter 9). Throughout, Harding presents a wealth of examples, often comparing the British data-set to that from the European continent. Taking such a perspective, he makes the point, evident in various studies of burial rites in France (eg Delattre 2011), that divisions between Britain and the continent are not as clear-cut as is often suggested. A final chapter reprises his main points and suggests some directions for the future, including the need to examine more systematically where the elusive dead of the Iron Age are, and the need to explore in more detail the possibility of cemeteries beyond hillfort boundaries, as well as to examine more closely, hillfort ditches, in order to assess the frequency of human remains.

Essential to any understanding of treatment of the dead in the British Iron Age is explaining the fragments of human remains which are frequently found on settlements, in physical boundaries and in the wider landscape. Harding accepts that the discoveries of dispersed and disarticulated human remains presumably relate to the practices of excarnation, and convincingly argues that

they were probably outcomes of complex processes of dispersal and deposition. Disappointingly, however, this argument is not developed in detail and, although recent discussions about whether or not human remains found on settlements actually reflect excarnation rites are acknowledged (eg Madgwick 2008; Tracey 2013), no definitive conclusion is offered. Recent suggestions that ‘cemeteries’ like Sudden Farm, Hampshire were effectively repositories of human remains to be re-used and manipulated later (see eg Sharples 2010), are acknowledged but not fully explored. Meanwhile, other important suggestions, for example that the majority of the ‘invisible’ dead may have been placed in rivers, are similarly skated over.

The approach to the place of fragmentary human remains is part of a broader tendency to divide practices, one emphasised by the consideration of ‘special’ and ‘structured deposition’ as discussed in Chapters 4 and 9. Harding seems to agree with a dualistic division between ‘special deposits’ and functional waste. This means that the deposition of human remains around houses and into boundaries (Chapter 4) is divorced from assessment of the deposition of other cultural material, such as animal remains (Chapter 9) or detailed consideration of the organisation of settlement space (such as doorway orientation), other than to suggest that these deposits are in some way liminal. This approach side-lines many studies from the last 20 years which have claimed that the deposition of material culture, human and animal remains cannot be examined in isolation. Along with examining the arrangement of settlement space, these studies stress that integrating our appreciation of deposition practices is essential for assessing the interrelationship between belief systems and social structures in the Iron Age (see eg Chadwick 2012). There is a danger that, despite the author emphasising a continuum and fluidity of practices, the book frequently re-emphasise distinctions, for example between formal burial and fragmentation; human remains and material culture, when these may be more a reflection of our own constructs than those of the Iron Age past.

Other areas of discussion are more successful. An assessment of what Harding defines as ‘Focal and signal burials’, provides an admirable attempt to move away from the assumption that burials with elaborate grave goods should be regarded merely as ‘high-status’. He emphasises here the need to think carefully about what grave goods and arrangement of such burials aim to signify, cautioning against simplistic inferences, such as the idea that ‘weapons equate to warriors’. There is also a thorough consideration of the place of violence in treatment of the dead, which includes a detailed reassessment of the so-called massacre deposits. Here we see more clearly a recognition of the links between disposal and fragmentation of the dead, warfare and the role of physical boundaries for these communities. This discussion, however, lacks the courage of its convictions. It would have been interesting to see a more explicit exploration of the links between violence, fragmentation of human remains and the ideas of ‘Personhood’. The connections between disposal of human remains and the place of violence in these communities could also be developed, with consideration, not least, of recent discussions on the place of head-hunting within these societies (Armit 2012).

Despite, or perhaps because of, its wealth of detail, the volume struggles to explore in any great depth what these deposits meant to the societies and communities performing them. Where interesting arguments are made, for example that hillforts played a specialist role in treatment of the dead, such arguments seem hard to justify on the basis of the evidence presented which focuses on exceptional examples, such as Sutton Common, Yorkshire, rather than systematic analysis of hillforts in general. This rather anecdotal approach also means that the relevance of treatment of the dead to the debate over the apparent regionality of the British Iron Age is side-lined. Apart from the usual ‘exceptions’ of East Yorkshire and South west England, it is hard to get a feel for the evident complexities of rites that existed within particular regions and therefore understanding whether these may signify different belief systems, social structures or cultural

influences. One way of avoiding this might have been to have explored some regional case studies in order to present the variety of funerary rites and how these changed over time.

Overall, this volume is a bold attempt to synthesise the varied and complex evidence for treatment of the dead in Iron Age Britain. It provides detailed observations on the variety of this material, successfully moving away from the often overly dominant focus on Wessex in many Iron Age studies. Ultimately though, the volume suffers from a rather disjointed approach and one that does not tackle head-on many of the perspectives on death and deposition that have developed in Iron Age archaeology over the last 20 years. This is a pity because it means that many of the important arguments and criticisms that are made are not fully developed or contextualised within current scholarship. Harding warns us away from what he regards as superfluous narrative in our accounts of the past, but there is a desperate need to add flesh to the bones in this book, for us to get a feel of what all this tell us about Iron Age societies. Despite such limitations, this volume certainly represents a useful resource for those studying the Iron Age in Britain, but for a full consideration of the place of the death in Iron Age societies it would be worthwhile reading this alongside some very different approaches to the subject (eg Sharples 2010; Giles 2012).

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