



## Book Reviews

### **NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE FUNERARY AND RITUAL PRACTICES IN WALES, 3600–1200 BC BY GENEVIEVE TELLIER**

*British Archaeological Reports 642, Oxford. 2018. 200pp, 90 black and white and colour figures, 47 tables, pb, ISBN 9781407316499, £47.00*

It is a good time to be an archaeologist with an interest in the later prehistory of Wales and the borders. In recent years there have been a number of illuminating books, including those by Burrow (2011), Johnson (2017) and Mullin (2012), as well as new projects such as Parker Pearson *et al's* (2019) work identifying megalith quarries that may be the source of Stonehenge's infamous bluestones and the partnership-delivered Bryn Celli Ddu Landscape Project. As the Pan Wales Heritage Interpretation Plan states 'we love a good story in Wales' and these studies are contributing to a story we can all love.

Tellier's new book is a welcome addition to this medley. It is based on her 2017 PhD thesis, undertaken at Bradford University, representing a detailed study of funerary and ritual practices in Wales between from the Middle Neolithic to the Middle Bronze Age. This involved the analysis of 257 human bone deposits (31 inhumed and 226 cremated) and the study of the contextual and chronological data associated with them.

Chapter 1 opens with an overview of archaeological work in Wales, providing the research context for the rest of the volume. We learn that despite 400 years of investigation into the ritual and funerary monuments in Wales, no work has been carried out to bring together and interrogate all of this data. Whilst this might be true of the Middle Neolithic–Middle Bronze Age period in its entirety that this study is concerned with, other work, considering shorter timescales within this and/or particular parts of Wales, certainly exist. Only monuments are considered in Tellier's research, which does mean that caves and rock shelters, along with other natural places, are not part of the story. Whether it is, then, justifiable to say that this is a summary of all of the evidence for funerary and ritual practices in Wales is debatable, though certainly the data from non-monumental sites can be problematic.

Chapter 2 looks at past approaches to the study of ritual and funerary practices in Wales and more modern interpretive models of these topics. This is easily identifiable as the 'literature review' part of the original thesis, demonstrating that the author is familiar with themes pertaining to her study. Such chapters are crucial to a PhD thesis though perhaps less

stimulating in published accounts. However, it is clear that Tellier has a good handle on the complex theoretical ideas that are the hallmark of the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods and manages to succinctly deal with weighty debates including the nature of ritual, identity creation and the meaning of grave goods.

Chapter 3 is concerned with establishing a chronological sequence for Middle Neolithic to Middle Bronze Age funerary and ritual monuments in Wales. Middle Neolithic activity is represented by pit graves and a small number of circular monuments; Late Neolithic by circular monuments and passage graves; Chalcolithic by circular enclosures and Beaker burials; Early Bronze Age by burial mounds and circular enclosures; Middle Bronze Age by burial mounds, cremation cemeteries, standing stones and one stone circle. A rich array of sites then, with 301 associated radiocarbon dates. There is an attempt to model some Early Bronze Age dates but perhaps without the level of detailed commentary we have come to expect in recent archaeological Bayesian modelling. All the radiocarbon dates are usefully included as an Appendix.

This is an appropriate place to mention the chronological conventions that Tellier uses. She identifies the five chronological periods, above, based on date spans associated with ceramic traditions. Hence in this study the Middle Neolithic begins at 3600 BC (with the inception of Impressed Wares) and the Middle Bronze Age at 1700 BC (Barrel and Bucket Urns). Both of these start dates are slightly at odds with many other studies which consider the Middle Neolithic as starting between 3500–3300 BC and the Middle Bronze Age at 1600–1500 BC. Is it a problem? Starting the Middle Neolithic at 3600 BC excludes the Early Neolithic from this study, which is probably wise, as the study is chronologically broad enough already and has more than enough data to consider. However, it means that the later phases of Early Neolithic burial monuments are excluded, despite the fact that they overlap with her Middle Neolithic period, creating a rather artificial separation between periods and practices. But this is a criticism that applies to archaeological studies more generally and to an extent is an inescapable part of current practice.

Tellier's discussion of monumental traditions is sound, though I would have found it helpful if more plans of the monuments that are discussed in this chapter were included. Similarly, there are distribution maps for some classes of monument but not others, which is slightly frustrating. Figure 40 shows the distribution of 15 henges, embanked and ditched enclosures whereas the text says there are 19 in total. Tellier also states that these monuments are mainly found in lowland coastal areas yet only seven or eight of those shown correspond to such areas.

Chapter 4 introduces the osteological aspect of the research and outlines the techniques and approaches to the human remains studied. Whilst sampling and methods information has to be included, this chapter will likely be skimmed over by the non-bone specialist. Greater treats await in Chapters 5 and 6 which present the results of the data analysis. These are the strongest parts of the book, making a clear original contribution. The author is aware of the limitations of the data, including the problems of extrapolating from the small samples which characterise some of the periods, demonstrating good criticality. In Chapter 5, we are presented with the results of her new osteological analysis, which is successfully integrated into a broader consideration of monumentality, burial practices and grave items through time. Unsurprisingly, the greater number of Early Bronze Age sites means that more can be said about this period and it forms the bulk of the chapter. Tables 18 and 21, summarising artefact associations with Early Bronze Age inhumations and cremation deposits by age and sex, are very useful and we see that there is differentiation by sex. We go on to learn that Early Bronze Age cremations often contain more than one individual, in contrast to earlier and later periods and that cremation in this period appears a more 'democratic' rite, with more non-adults and women represented than in inhumations.

Chapter 6 presents the results of Tellier's analysis of pyre technology and cremation ritual data. There is fascinating detail here. She shows that the cremation of complete fleshed bodies, as opposed to the cremation of dry bones, was the norm throughout the Middle Neolithic to Middle Bronze Age in Wales. Most of these bodies were well-cremated, indicating pyre temperatures of 700–800°C, though around 20% of Middle Bronze Age bodies were less well-cremated. We also learn that over 20% of Early Bronze Age cremation deposits contain fragments of cremated animal bones. Although these were not studied in detail by Tellier, she was able to identify at least three different species, suggested to be pig, sheep/goat and cattle/cattle-sized mammal.

A discussion of the research findings is presented in Chapter 7. The burial evidence, ritual practices and monumental traditions are summarised by period and the dating evidence considered. There is some attempt to contextualise the results within the broader British framework but this is perhaps not as thorough as I would have liked, with reliance on a relatively limited number of sources. I was surprised, for example, that the discussion of cremated human bones within circular enclosures failed to make reference to the Aubrey Holes at Stonehenge. Nonetheless, the chapter makes a series of satisfactory statements about the nature of funerary and ritual practices within Wales from the Middle Neolithic to the Middle Bronze Age. These are revisited in Chapter 8, the conclusion, which also offers suggestions for future avenues of research.

A few things struck after reading this book. Tellier takes a (rightly) critical stance on radiocarbon dates, questioning the reliability of many existing dates from the region because of uncertain stratigraphic associations and the old wood effect. Yet she has no problem with dating the Penmaenmawr stone circle to the Middle Bronze Age, based on cremation burials *outside* the circle; similarly some standing stones are assigned to the Middle Bronze Age based on dates from features *close* to them. There is little mention of the Early Neolithic and whilst including this data set may have made the study too large, it still would have been helpful to have provided a summary of the funerary and monumental traditions of Wales for this earlier period to better contextualise all that follows.

Overall though, this is a comprehensive volume that illuminates the rich prehistory of Wales. The strongest contribution lies in the new analysis of human remains, which, as Tellier says, have previously been considered to be of only limited value. It is a book that is rich in data and will prove very useful for those studying prehistoric funerary practices in Britain and Europe.

### References

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