



Book Reviews

NEOLITHIC BRITAIN: THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL WORLDS BY KEITH RAY AND JULIAN THOMAS

Oxford University Press, 2018. 383pp. 97 B&W and col figs and pls, hb, ISBN 9780198823896, £30.00

This smartly produced volume, with an inviting cover image by Adam Stanford, presents an up-to-date comprehensive introduction to the Neolithic period in Britain from c.4000–2200 BC. Complementing extensive bibliographies of work on the subject by its authors, it incorporates the latest archaeological discoveries, approaches and technologies, and shows how these have radically influenced current understanding. It covers major archaeological landscapes, such as Stonehenge and Orkney, as well as lesser-known areas of Britain, and presents an overview of the Neolithic on the basis of a new appreciation of its chronology.

Ray and Thomas's principal objective is to provide the reader with a 'concise panorama of the history of Neolithic Britain through two narrative approaches' (p.8). Essentially, they aim to provide a written account of connected events which tells a story (p.9). They do this by exploring the social dimensions of cultural practices interpreted from archaeological remains, situating them within a dynamic historical framework focused on the understanding people had of their own past. The first of the two narrative approaches provide an unfolding chronological sequence within three chapters and covers nearly two millennia. The second, more thematic, narrative is placed in two intervening chapters, between and after the sequential accounts. It is intended to appeal to a broad audience of both specialist and non-specialist readers.

Chapter 1 describes and explains the different interpretative perspectives for the Neolithic period in Britain over the past 60 years. Chapter 2 explores current understanding of the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition around 4000 BC. Chapter 3 describes further transformations across the centuries to 3000 BC. These include the construction of 'big houses', the growth of exchange networks, the construction of mounds, the digging and filling of pits, the digging of strings of ditch segments and associated banks, and later the digging of long parallel-ditched enclosures. Chapter 4, a more thematic chapter, explores aspects of Neolithic life and culture across the whole span of the Neolithic in Britain. It considers flint mining, collective feasting, dwelling, herding and hunting, then conflict, warfare and injury. It addresses the working and raising of timber, circulation of stone axes, and weaving and basketry as represented in ceramics. The closing section deals with the deposition of human remains. Chapter 5 focuses on the third millennium

and Britain-wide networks of social and cultural exchange. The complexity of activity on the Orkney mainland is examined, as well as the apparent implications of the later Neolithic chronology for the transmission of a Grooved Ware complex southwards, culminating in the creation of monumental complexes such as at Stonehenge and Avebury. The relationship of this evidence for monuments and connected activities, such as feasting, to the arrival of Beakers and the first use of metal is reviewed at length. Chapter 6, the second more thematic chapter, focuses on the importance of descent and the existence of historical consciousness of people in the Neolithic.

As an account, it is richly informative and well structured. It weaves elegantly the local detail into grand narratives and is well argued. Reference to Stuart Piggott's (1954) *Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles* is a pleasingly appropriate start to the main body of the work. The 'Conclusion: A lived Neolithic' is followed by a *Glossary of technical words* which may be of particular benefit to the non-specialist reader, for whom the authors hope to 'illuminate' the Neolithic and provide a window into how fascinating it can be (p.10). Next is a detailed *Bibliographical commentary* which provides an enlightening 'guided walk' through key further reading on the period. Finally, before the *Index*, there is *An Outline of chronologies* which deals with time as a concept and what this means in terms of lived lives. It also contains a helpful summary timeline. The book is beautifully illustrated with key artefacts, sites and monuments. The inclusion of artwork such as vivid wood-engravings for chapter frontispieces adds to the experience of reading this ambitious volume. It is carefully crafted and well thought out; the production quality is also excellent.

In terms of its conclusions, the book explores whether there was a way of 'being Neolithic'. It evaluates the usefulness of the study and 'experiencing' the Neolithic. It contests the view that the primary subject of the Neolithic is the advent of farming and events which led to the reliance on food production. It explains how this is rooted in a materialistic conception of history. In contrast, the authors restate their argument that the Neolithic concerned a move to a different conception of sociality made possible but not determined by the arrival and adoption of domesticates. Encouragingly, concepts such as 'the genealogy of practices' which Thomas introduced more than a quarter of a century ago (1991) still feature in this volume.

Original and innovative in style, the book sets out to be both academically stimulating and accessible. It achieves both of these successfully and does so with archaeological rigour. According to its authors, it is 'not envisaged as a textbook...though it can be read in part as such' (p.9). Other introductory textbooks to the Neolithic already exist (eg, Cummings 2017). This is markedly different in style and approach from every other volume about the period. While the boldness of the decision to rely on the *Bibliographic commentary* rather than use formal referencing must be applauded, and is understood in the context of the key objective of the authors, the level of detail is such that the more immediate ability to check sources would have been helpful. It is not always intuitive. For example, out of purely personal interest, the reviewer's

work (Walker 2015: cat. 56) is cited in the caption to Fig. 2.7; however, the full reference appears in the *Bibliographic commentary* which accompanies Chapter 6 rather than Chapter 2. It would also be interesting to see how many copies are bought by non-specialists compared with specialists to ascertain the true success of this book and to read reviews written by both.

While it does not attempt to add new research itself, the book highlights how detailed research into individual site chronologies can suggest precise time narratives. It also shows how this new awareness of time can allow issues of inheritance, kinship and descent to be more fully appreciated. Julian Thomas's previous book (2013), *The Birth of Neolithic Britain: An Interpretative Account* was criticised for lack of detail on the Mesolithic (Sheridan 2015). Since its publication there has been more reporting of 'terminal' Mesolithic sites and the present book usefully highlights some of this new information (p.352). First and foremost, however, it makes a timely and important contribution to understanding the Neolithic as it provides 'a pause for reflection' (p.9), giving the opportunity for assimilation and interpretation when developments in the discipline are happening at such a pace.

The authors highlight the intellectual challenges caused by the complexity and incompleteness of the Neolithic traces. For example, they urge readers to treat existing aDNA results with caution at this stage due to the small dataset and the selective nature of the source material (pp89–91). As such, they recognise that they cannot deliver a workable understanding by rendering it in narrative terms as 'a world just like our own' (p.10). In this respect, it differs from David Miles's (2016) book *The Tale of the Axe: How the Neolithic Revolution Transformed Britain*, which the authors highlight as a parallel accessible work. This is also clearly not the final word on the story of the British Neolithic, nor does it claim to be.

Because this book is a synthesis, it is highly selective in terms of what evidence is presented and which sites are chosen for inclusion. There are, of course, other ways in which the story of the Neolithic could be told and this one can be challenged. It follows Thomas's well-rehearsed 'indigenous acculturation' model of Neolithic beginnings as presented in his previous book (2013). The unfolding of the Neolithic in Britain has become more closely defined chronologically in recent years, not least with the application of Bayesian modelling and the publication of *Gathering Time* (Whittle *et al.* 2011). This has led to the restatement of the idea of an 'immigration' of farmers and the spread of a Neolithic lifestyle northwards and westwards (*ibid.*). The evidence presented in this book is used to argue that there were cross-Channel contacts before 4000 BC with piecemeal movements of people relocating permanently. It is also used to argue that Neolithic life in Britain by 3800 BC had clear antecedents among the existing late Mesolithic communities. For an alternative, and arguably more accurate, view of a multi-stranded introduction of the Neolithic 'package' into Britain from different regions of Europe, see work by Alison Sheridan (eg, 2010). This reviewer has recently provided a comparison of these models, including more nuanced models showing regional variation (such as Garrow & Sturt 2011), as well as a model based on

radiocarbon dates as a proxy for population density proposed by Mark Collard and colleagues (Collard *et al.* 2010) which is not discussed in this book (Walker 2018, 37–44).

Minor gripes with the volume include this reviewer's name spelt incorrectly in the index and in the *Bibliographical commentary*, and the axe-heads of 'Danish' type are referred to as 'triangular-sectioned' rather than 'rectangular-sectioned' (p.363). The word 'forest' is used throughout the book when 'woodland' may be more appropriate (eg, p.25 and p.30). While fundamentally elegantly written, there are occasional overly-long sentences such as 'This reintroduced the long-established idea, ultimately attributable to the European Enlightenment, that societies develop through time by passing through a series of characteristic stages of increasing complexity and sophistication, within which communities became progressively more internally differentiated and ranked' (p.25). The expression 'progressively more' occurs several times throughout the book (eg, p.25, p.70). Page 70 has a typographical error with introduction written as 'introduccion'. In the caption to Figure 4.13, 'decease' should read 'deceased'. There is a mis-placed apostrophe in 'giant's' (p.323). Fourth millennium BC should be third (p.274). Throughout Chapter 6, the Post Track (see eg, Hillam *et al.* 1990), the timber trackway predating the Sweet Track, is incorrectly named the 'Pole Track'. A small stylistic issue is 'twenty-first-century' rather than '21st century' (p.325). The final sentence 'And, with that reflection, we end our account' is not to the taste of the reviewer; however, in the context of the work as a story its presence is understandable.

These are minor criticisms of what is an admirably bold and important work. It is elegant, sophisticated and informative. It provides more than a regular book in that it delivers an experience. The addition of formal referencing and a bibliography it would make it indispensable.

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