

Book Review

CHALLENGING PRECONCEPTIONS OF THE EUROPEAN IRON AGE: ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR JOHN COLLIS, EDITED BY WENDY MORRISON

Archaeopress Archaeology 2022. 161 pages, 29 photographs, 41 illustrations, 3 tables. ISBN 978-1-80327-006-7 (£30).

Professor John Collis is one of the ‘big names’ of later prehistoric archaeology. He has been a leading expert on the European Iron Age for over 50 years and during that time proved himself to be an exceptional excavator. His first academic appointment was at Exeter in 1970, but he left after two years to join the Archaeology Department at the University of Sheffield with its greater focus on prehistoric archaeology. There he spent the rest of his academic career, inspiring countless students and becoming a vociferous voice on the nature of Iron Age societies. Many of his publications remain key texts on student reading lists, especially those critically addressing the issue of the ‘Celts’, and it is that debate for which he has, in recent years, perhaps become best known.

This edited volume constitutes a collection of 12 essays brought together by many of Professor Collis’ colleagues and students in honour of his 75th birthday. Their themes are wide-ranging; from hillforts and burials, to transhumance and the development of states. This is testament to the breadth of Collis’ research interests which span the later prehistory of Britain and the European continent.

The volume starts with a short preface by Wendy Morrison. This provides a useful overview of the volume and its scope, but a short biography of Collis’ career would have been welcome here, especially for those less familiar with his achievements (although some of this is drawn out in the proceeding papers). The first major contribution is a paper by Strat Halliday and Ian Ralston exploring the coastal and inland promontory forts of Scotland. Using this set of sites they investigate issues of chronology, classification and function which have clear resonance for the broader study of hillforts across Britain. Many sites are described in detail – this is essential for drawing out the nuance of sequence – but the absence of site plans and photographs makes following complex description difficult. The data for the paper is derived largely from the recently compiled and published *Atlas of*

Hillforts of Britain and Ireland (Lock and Ralston 2017). Unsurprisingly the authors include many tables and charts and these show some interesting patterns (for example, size differences between coastal and inland promontory forts). As the authors admit though, the significance of these patterns, beyond say pragmatic concerns around the availability of suitable promontories, is not yet clear. Nonetheless, the paper highlights the potential analytical power of the atlas data to advance our knowledge of prehistoric hillforts.

The following paper, by Henrietta Quinnell, changes focus to examine ceramics. Quinnell provides an important synthesis of her observations and thinking from several decades of experience analysing later prehistoric pottery in Devon and Cornwall. Received wisdom suggests pottery use in the region was similar to most other parts of Britain from the Neolithic to Middle Bronze Age, after which it became much less common until the later parts of the Iron Age. However, Quinnell provides a compelling case that many Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age ceramics in the region may have gone previously unrecognised (for example at Hembury). This has important implications for other regions of later prehistoric Britain often considered aceramic or where pottery use was apparently minimal.

The next two papers change the geographic focus to the European continent. First, Martin Kuna discusses the problems inherent in the increasing use of ‘big data’ to explore archaeological questions, particularly those of demography. Utilising the *Archaeological Map of the Czech Republic* (AMCR) as a case study, Kuna questions whether the archaeological record reliably reflects past reality. Often it is presumed that big data can suppress individual errors, but Kuna argues that the distortion in data is actually larger than usually admitted. This is an intriguing thought and he provides a useful critique of the processes that have created very large datasets, from past activity to recent fieldwork practices. Sophie Krausz then offers a paper inspired by Collis’ work on urbanisation and state formation in temperate Europe. Exploring the nature of Gallic societies in the latter half of the first millennium BC, Krausz asks why, given that they were exposed to Mediterranean polities at an early stage, such societies did not develop state ideologies in a linear way and, at times, favoured other social forms. She draws on Pierre Clastres’ work ‘*Societies Against the State*’ to argue that after the collapse of the Hallstatt D princely seats, Gallic societies of the 4th and 3rd centuries BC in fact rejected centralisation of power. Aristocratic families, she argues, fiercely maintained their independence until new forms of agglomeration – the oppida – appeared from the 2nd century. The work of Clastres has been drawn on by other archaeologists in recent years – Gonzalez Garcia *et al.* (2011) have used it to explain the emergence of social complexity during the Iron Age in north-west

Iberia for instance, and it is slightly odd that that work is not referenced here. Nonetheless, this paper is an important and intriguing critique on the perceived linearity of state formation.

The fifth contribution is a ‘late’ book review by Chris Gosden of Collis’ seminal publication ‘The European Iron Age’ (1984). Despite being almost 40 years old it remains a key text on any student module regarding the Iron Age on the continent. It is an interesting approach to provide a book review after so long as it allows the publication to be placed into its broader theoretical context. As Gosden highlights, it is a remarkable book of synthesis written from a ‘processual archaeology’ perspective but within the emerging ‘post-processual turn’. I have always found it odd that Collis did not choose to update the book and provide at least one revised edition, but the simple quantity of new data made available over the intervening years probably made that an almost impossible task.

Andrew Fleming’s paper on transhumance brings the geographical focus back to Britain. An increasing number of isotopic studies on animal bone assemblages have shown that some animals, and by inference people, were moving long distances in later prehistory. Fleming makes the case that, during this period, transhumance should be seen as a relatively stable cultural practice, not just in parts of Wales, Scotland and Ireland where it is more widely accepted, but in areas such as southern England too. The seventh paper, by Frances Griffiths and Eileen Wilkes, takes us to Devon, where Collis’ academic career first started. The authors provide a useful review of aerial survey in the county since the 1970s and outline the major changes in understanding.

The following paper by Graeme Guilbert returns to the theme of hillforts. This is a very lengthy contribution which contrasts markedly with the other papers in the volume. Nonetheless it is an important paper that provides a detailed critical reassessment of one of the most spectacular and exposed hillforts in Britain – that of Mam Tor in the Peak District. The hillfort crowns a sinuous ridge that is littered with landslips, some even across the hillfort’s boundaries. Within the interior of Mam Tor are the remains of a large number of roughly circular platforms, presumed to be the location of houses of a sizeable prehistoric population. Through countless site visits in variable conditions, Guilbert is able to expertly unpick the complexity of the surviving remains and produce the first complete plan of its earthworks and interior. He also offers a detailed reassessment of small-scale excavations conducted in the 1960s, questioning the assumption that all of the platforms mark the position of houses and rejecting the presumed Bronze Age origin for the hillfort. Importantly however, through a detailed reading of the stratigraphy, he notes the presence of a platform beneath the hillfort rampart, lending weight to the case for a pre-hillfort ‘hilltop platform settlement’ that may account for the Bronze Age metal-working evidence recovered during the excavations.

The next paper by Tim Champion reassesses a burial from Canterbury. Most of our knowledge of Roman and pre-Roman Canterbury is derived from relatively recent rescue excavation, but Champion highlights the important observations of James Pilbrow when installing the sewer system beneath the city in the late 19th century. Two cremation burials were happened upon, one of which was buried with a bronze basin, with vine-leaf attachment, and other enigmatic objects including iron bars and a metal ‘lion head’. This group of objects have long been considered Roman, but Champion makes a compelling argument that they constitute the accompaniments to a rich Late Iron Age grave dating to the first half of the 1st century BC. This is significant because, taken together with tentative evidence of a Late Iron Age enclosure beneath the Roman town, it suggests that Canterbury may have already been established and flourishing by that date.

The following paper, by Chris Cumberpatch, reflects on ongoing theoretical debates in Medieval pottery studies. The paper is an interesting rebuttal to recent developments of ‘relational archaeology’, and will, I am sure, provoke further debate. However, its inclusion within this volume, focussed as it is on the European Iron Age, feels odd. It is followed by a paper by Lisa Brown which returns us to the first millennium BC and to the subject of hillforts. Brown provides a thought-provoking summary of recent work in and around the city of Bath at two adjacent hillforts: Bathampton Camp and Little Solsbury Hill. Both have been subject to excavation in the past and produced small assemblages of ceramics, of which, as would perhaps be expected, Brown offers a reassessment. On present evidence Brown argues for contemporaneous activity at both sites during the Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age transition, an interpretation strengthened by the identification of a possible midden site on the lower slopes of Bathampton Down. The final paper, by Oliver Buchsenschutz, focusses on the Celts. This topic is a welcome addition given the focus of much of Collis’ recent writings (although readers may find it strange that it features only once in this volume). Buchsenschutz draws on more ‘big data’ in an attempt to ‘map Celticity’ across the continent. Whether one agrees that this is possible or not, Buchsenschutz provides a salutary warning against creating maps that lack details of the sources consulted and their origins.

Overall, this is a valuable volume celebrating the achievements of one of the most important Iron Age archaeologists of the last 50 years. Its scope is wide-ranging which means that while not everyone will find value in all of the papers, there will be something of value to anyone interested in the first millennium BC of Britain or the European continent.

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Review submitted: January 2023

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