



Book Reviews

OLD OSWESTRY HILLFORT AND ITS LANDSCAPE: ANCIENT PAST, UNCERTAIN FUTURE, EDITED BY TIM MALIM AND GEORGE NASH

Archaeopress, Oxford, 2020, 241 pp, 119 B&W and col figs, 35 plates, 5 tables, ISBN 978-1-78969-611-0, pb, £45.00

The hillfort at Old Oswestry is well known to most with an interest in the Iron Age because of the unique cellular structure incorporated into the western entrance of what is a developed multivallate hillfort. Recently it has become more widely known for the campaign 'Hands Off Old Oswestry Hillfort' (HOOOH) that formed as a result of a proposed housing development within the immediate vicinity of the site.

The collection of papers in this volume by members of HOOOH are a response to this proposed development, to increase knowledge of Old Oswestry in its landscape and act as a foil to future development within its hinterland, a noble cause that continues to the present.

The papers are divided into three parts. The first deals with our knowledge of the Iron Age in the northern Marches and how Old Oswestry fits within this landscape of hillforts.

David J. Matthews starts the volume presenting an argument for warfare and continuity in the region during the first millennium BC, continuing an argument for which hillfort studies have largely moved on from. Erin Lloyd Jones and Fiona Gale explore the results of fieldwork at hillforts in the surrounding region and in a second paper Matthews looks at the intervisibility of hillforts and social organization, suggesting the existence of two regional socio-political groups, divided by the Ellesmere moraine.

The second section focuses on the hillfort itself, its layout and mythology. Tim Malim starts the section discussing the topography and morphology of Old Oswestry hillfort with the observation that the ramparts do not simply follow the contours of the hill but ascend or descend to promote visibility of certain points within the interior. He suggests that certain axis drawn between opposing corners of ramparts had significant solar alignments such as the sun rising close to the Wrekin at Imbolic (2nd February) when viewed from the south-eastern corner of the hillfort or the spring equinox sun setting through the western entrance.

George Nash, Maggie Rowlands and Rodney Farmer give a short discussion of the Epona Stone, a heavily plough scarred rock, with the partial bas relief image of a horse that was discovered by a lay-by near the western entrance of Old Oswestry in 2008. Caroline Malim links Old Oswestry to Arthurian legend and explores nearby Whittingham Castle's association with the Holy Grail. A third paper by Matthews theorises on the territories of the Deceangli and Cornovii 'tribes,' their respective identities and potentially contrasting relationships with the Romans and a second offering from Tim Malim looks at Wat's Dyke and how it integrates Old Oswestry hillfort. It reviews the excavated evidence of the early medieval monument and notes an apparent relationship between Wat's Dyke and a number of standing stones in the Oswestry area. He makes comparison with other known dykes such as the Wansdyke to argue for a possible earlier, prehistoric precursor.

The third section of the volume looks at the historic development of its landscape and the threats that it currently faces. It opens with Nash looking at the history of Oldport Farm, a large farm complex that sits just 150 m to the south-east of Old Oswestry. He presents the case for redating the core elements of the farm to the eighteenth century in opposition to the current nineteenth century date listed by the HER. Re-assessment of the chronology of the farm complex however was only conducted from the exterior 'as no permission to access this property has been granted' (p.167) meaning that a lot of important evidence for the assessment was not available. In the next paper Nash studies the World War One heritage of the area, including Park Hall military camp, Mile House POW camp and practice trenches to the north and east of Oswestry and even in Old Oswestry itself although these are not quite as rare as Nash suggests.

Andrew Tullo then provides an industrial history of the Oswestry area and the impact of the arrival of the railways. George Nash and Tim Malim explores the development proposals around Old Oswestry and how, despite planning regulations to protect the historic environment, Government and Local Planning Authorities reach decisions that appear contrary to planning guidance. John Swogger explores the medium of comics for disseminating archaeology and how they were mobilized in the HOOOH campaign. Finally in Chapter 14, Kate Clarke, Neil Phillips and Tim Malim discuss the Oswestry Heritage Gateway, one legacy of HOOOH, that aims to 'conserve and promote' the heritage of the Oswestry area.

The volume has an eclectic feel to it with such diverse topics being explored with only Old Oswestry as a common link. As a result, people with diverse interests may find something of interest here. Jones and Gale's comprehensive and well-written summary on the hillforts of the surrounding region was a personal favourite and other chapters in the volume would have benefited from prior access and reference to this paper. Tullo's exploration of the area's industrial heritage is another interesting contribution and along with Nash's look at World War One heritage

of the area cover aspects not commonly covered in landscape studies centred on hillforts. Similarly, Swogger's paper on comics explores a medium not commonly exploited by archaeologists to reach their audiences but one that presents significant opportunities for moving beyond an academic readership.

However, there are some glaring flaws in the publication. In several cases, the authors would have benefited from access to the resources of an academic library. For instance, Matthews' chapter on the martial role of hillforts relies overly on broad prehistoric summaries and dated texts. The debate surrounding the binary opposition of hillforts as martial or communal structures has largely moved on and none of the more recent discussions on the topic that you would expect to see are cited (e.g. Armit 2007; James 2007; Lock 2011).

In Chapter 9, Nash presents the case for redating the core elements of Oldport farm to the eighteenth century in opposition to the current nineteenth century date listed by the HER. Speculation by the author that traces of ridge and furrow in the surrounding fields indicates the presence of a farmstead in the medieval period shows a lack of understanding of the nature and operation of ridge and furrow cultivation systems.

Poor reasoning is also displayed in a number of the other papers. For example chapter 3 explores the intervisibility of hillforts in the region to suggest that 'the intensification in the flow of information and energy that hillfort intervisibility enabled drove social organisation forward... towards increasing levels of complexity' (p.23) although without testing against an independent control group we are unable to say whether the hills chosen as the sites for hillforts were more intervisible than those that were not. Also, it is clear that the hillforts of the region have different chronological biographies with different patterns of occupation that shift over time. A lack of excavation at most hillforts means that we do not know their chronologies and so this study works on the flawed assumption of all hillforts being occupied at the same time.

Chapter 3 also exhibits an unquestioning acceptance of the idea advanced by Children and Nash (1997; 2001) that intervisible hillforts shared a common socio-political identity and 'sense of collective well-being' (1997). When the average distance between linked hillforts is very varied – 14–49 km (for the top 13 intervisible hillforts), what exactly is intervisible and how it creates relatedness and equals socio-political unity is not explored.

There are undoubtedly flaws in some of the papers presented here and the volume would have benefited from a rigorous peer review process. That said, the volume is meticulously laid out, with few spelling or grammatical errors and well-illustrated throughout, in particular Rebecca Stockburn's paintings in Caroline Malim's paper are excellent.

The overriding message behind the publication is the very real threat that is posed to our heritage. It outlines the very important work of members of HOOOH and now Oswestry Heritage Gateway in mobilizing the public to defend our cultural assets.

References

- Armit, I. 2007. Hillforts at war: from Maiden Castle to Taniwaha Pā. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* **73**, 25–37
- Children, G. and Nash, G. 1997. Encoding space: the Iron Age of south-east Wales – a question of defence or social statementing. *3rd Stone* **25**, 7–12
- Children, G. and Nash, G. 2001. The Iron Age of south east Wales and the central Marches: assessing ‘hillforts’ as social statements rather than monuments of warfare and defence. *Australian Celtic Journal* **7**, 2000–2001
- James, S. 2007. A bloodless past: the pacification of Early Iron Age Britain. In C. C. Haselgrove and R. Pope, *The Earlier Iron Age in Britain and the Near Continent*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 160–73
- Lock, G. 2011. Hillforts, emotional metaphors, and the good life: a response to Armit. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* **77**, 355–362

Andy Valdez-Tullett
Wessex Archaeology

Review submitted: March 2022

The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor