



Book Reviews

A WELSH LANDSCAPE THROUGH TIME. EXCAVATIONS AT PARC CYBI, HOLY ISLAND, ANGLESEY BY JANE KENNEY, WITH FRANCES LYNCH AND ANDREW DAVIDSON

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This volume represents the long-awaited results of one of the largest pre-construction excavations to take place in North Wales, the substantial multi-phase site of Parc Cybi, investigated in several campaigns between 2001 and 2010 by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust. Most of the specialist reports, details of stratigraphies and soil descriptions have been omitted (they are instead available for free download online), with just the main narrative summarised here. The result is a substantial, but highly readable and lavishly illustrated work that introduces a rich prehistoric, Roman, medieval and early modern site. It is much to the credit of the authors that they have pulled this wealth of data together, in spite of the substantial delay they had to face over post-excavation work. They have succeeded in creating a volume that is detailed enough to appeal to scholars, but can also be enjoyed by a wider public interested in tracing the remarkable development of this Anglesey landscape over 8000 years.

Human occupation is first attested in the Mesolithic, while the Early Neolithic sees the erection of a timber hall and the tomb at Trefignath, which was excavated in the 1970s. More ephemeral activity is documented alongside, and this continues into the Late Neolithic, Beaker period and Early Bronze Age. At this time, there is also a burnt mound and a ceremonial complex, comprising several cists under an earthen mound, ring ditches and a D-shaped enclosure, as well as a standing stone. Late Bronze Age occupation may be indicated by a timber roundhouse, but it is the Early and Middle Iron Age that see the second peak of activity, as a settlement of several substantial stone roundhouses, granaries, outbuildings, paths and field systems could be excavated. By the Late Iron Age, the focus of activity had shifted elsewhere, and for the Roman period the excavation appears to have caught the more outlying areas of a larger farmstead. There is also an early cist cemetery dated to the late Roman period. Early medieval corn driers suggest that the withdrawal of Roman rule did not lead to substantial disruption here. Finally, the authors trace the development of the farming landscape through medieval and into modern times.

The book begins with a general introduction of the main features of the site, placed in the context of what is generally known of the various periods in Britain. This is followed by the geological setting and landscape development over time, as well as distribution maps showing known sites of various ages on Anglesey. These eloquently document the substantial impact the Parc Cybi excavations have had on our knowledge of the island's (pre)history.

The remainder of the volume presents the evidence chronologically. All of the period-specific chapters describe each set of features in turn, detailing the constructional evidence, dating and range of finds, alongside any specialist analyses that were undertaken. This is followed by an in-depth comparison to other, similar evidence both in Anglesey/north Wales, the wider Irish Sea area and the UK as a whole, helping to contextualise Parc Cybi and to draw out its wider significance. All this is very well illustrated, with key section drawings, colour photographs of the site, reconstruction drawings, and photos and drawings of finds. The standard throughout is very high, with the interpretation of the structures' appearance and function very closely argued and supported in appropriate detail. In what follows, I will briefly summarise some of the Early Neolithic and Early/Middle Iron Age findings.

The three-aisled Neolithic timber hall is an impressive structure over 15 metres long that fits well into the wider regional context of northern Wales. According to Bayesian modelling of ¹⁴C dates, the structure could have been in use over as little as 30–75 years, starting in 3710 cal BC and thereby falling into the "Irish house boom". The available finds seem to indicate a broadly routine use of the building, with highly fragmented sherds and stone tools, and a high reliance on dairy (as shown by lipid analysis of sherds). Even over the course of these one to three generations, the building was apparently extended at least once. It was also deliberately dismantled, with some posts pulled out, a grinding stone potentially deliberately deposited, and hearths and pits referencing the former structure being established immediately afterwards. Contemporary to the house, more ephemeral activity was recorded in the wider landscape, something that could only be revealed because of the large-scale nature of the work. As the authors argue, it is most likely that the house represented a fixed point for the local group, whose life was otherwise characterised by considerable mobility. This is also the case for Trefignath tomb, which was remodelled repeatedly, most likely to reflect the changing priorities of its users. This sense of dynamism, of (domestic and mortuary) monuments that remain fluid and adaptable rather than fossilised, continues well into the Bronze Age, when at least the D-shaped enclosure also sees several building phases. Indeed, the transition to the Beaker period appears to have occasioned very little change in the general model of inhabitation: ephemeral traces of daily life are scattered around a dynamic monumental centre. In addition, Parc Cybi has yielded some rather late dates for Grooved Ware, suggesting that the transition to the Beaker period may have been later, and perhaps less dramatic, than recently suggested for the British Isles based on aDNA evidence

(Olalde *et al.* 2019). This is also supported by the small group of cist interments under a mound, which the authors suggest (p.89) could show a more group-oriented focus of the burial rite, in contrast to the greater individualism often associated with the Beaker period.

The evidence is well presented, and the discussion (for example when plunging the interpretative limits of possible “structured” pit deposition for the later part of the Neolithic) is generally well-balanced and insightful. Nevertheless, there is a missed opportunity here to explicitly take up the wider frame of the debate briefly raised in chapter two, in this case particularly concerning migration, population movement and perhaps replacement. Contact across and along the Irish Sea is mentioned repeatedly and evident in domestic architecture, pottery, metalwork and ritual, but there is little effort to understand what such mutual influences would have involved in human terms, at what social scale mobility was primarily enacted or what sorts of opportunities, risks and strains it could have involved for local communities. How could mobile individuals and groups have been accommodated, and were they? Instead, the narrative here rather stresses the predictability of the seasonal round. This is also aided by the technically accomplished reconstruction drawing (p.50), which gives an excellent impression of the building, but also depicts an idyllic and gender-segregated family scene of playing children and industrious adults.

Very similar points can be made for the main phase of Iron Age occupation. At this time, substantial effort went into making the wetter parts of the site near a marsh suitable for construction. First, a stone platform was built on which a wooden structure potentially stood (and was burnt down). A ritual interpretation is proposed here (p.104), but in analogy with Must Farm (Cambridgeshire), with crannogs or, further afield, Alpine lake villages, one could also suggest other possibilities – wetlands provide all manner of attractive resources. Be this as it may, more soil is later dumped into this area to facilitate the building of a substantial stone roundhouse, subsequently dismantled and replaced by two further, equally impressive stone houses of more than 11 metres internal diameter. These see at least one episode of rebuilding, aimed at thickening the walls particularly near the entrances. Entrances are focal points in other ways as well: access to the houses is guided and controlled by paths, walls and ditches, and unusually the main doorways face north-west (although there are subsidiary ones in the south-east), towards Holyhead Mountain and its hillfort. Along the access routes are granaries, while further outhouses and industrial buildings have been excavated at the main site and some distance away. One stone building, closer to the marsh, was constructed in a different style, and there is also a timber roundhouse a little further to the north.

Again, the evidence is presented in an exemplary fashion, but given that the subtitle of the chapter promises to address “settlement and politics” (p.99), the discussion of “politics” remains somewhat superficial. The problem may partly be that the site is referred to as a “village” (p.145),

with all the modern baggage that this term implies (see e.g. Rathbone 2013) and which is here again reinforced by a reconstruction drawing (p.147) which shows the houses surrounded by playing children and adults engaged in everyday and gender-segregated tasks (there are also chickens, although these are likely to have been rare birds at this time, see e.g. Sykes 2012). As a result, it becomes difficult to reconcile the evidence for the elaborate and almost processional access routes, the exceptionally large houses, the granaries flaunting the site's wealth and so on with the idea, much indebted to Barry Cunliffe's (1991, 213–46) reconstruction of Iron Age settlement hierarchies, that we are here faced with people "of middling status" who lived "under the protection of the chiefs in the hillforts" (p.150). In the end, the authors can only resolve this tension by first suggesting a purely ceremonial role for the impressive building A, and then eventually for all the large stone-built houses on site (p.167), making this a settlement with more meeting houses than dwellings. What is missing here is a wider discussion presenting alternatives of how Iron Age politics and the distribution of power between hillforts and open sites could have worked. Scholars such as Sharples (2010), Morrison (2015) and Davis (2013) have shown that the inhabitants of hillforts need not have formed a chiefly social stratum apart from the rest of society, and that power relations (the stuff of politics) may have been considerably more fluid. The Parc Cybi houses with their focus on access and boundaries also correspond well with the general concern for demarcation and the control of liminal spaces evident in the Iron Age, so that there is no need here to invoke an extraordinary, ceremonial function for the majority of buildings on this basis.

Finally, it is a shame that the overall conclusion to the volume is only a page long. While still conveying a good sense of the long-term inhabitation of this landscape, this is too short to outline the critical contribution that excavations such as this one, with its multi-period scope and detailed attention to the evidence, can make in critiquing the often highly general arguments on which dominant wider narratives, for example of migration or social structure, are based.

Still, in the grand scheme of things these are small quibbles. The important thing was to get this rich and detailed corpus of data to a varied audience, and this has been achieved in an exemplary fashion. The long list of specialists and excavation staff mentioned in the acknowledgements show what an enormous job it was to pull this site narrative together, especially in the face of frustrating delays. The table of ¹⁴C dates and the many carefully modelled activity sequences presented throughout the volume, the detailed lists of parallels for the Parc Cybi structures, the closely argued interpretations of landscape use – all these are invaluable resources to anyone interested in the archaeology of north Wales, the Irish Sea region and indeed beyond. This was a huge job, and it has been fulfilled admirably.

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Daniela Hofmann
Bergen University

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