



Book Reviews

YARNTON: NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE SETTLEMENT AND LANDSCAPE BY GILL HEY, CHRISTOPHER BELL, CAROLINE DENNIS AND MARK ROBINSON

Oxford Archaeology, Thames Valley Landscape monograph 39. 2016, 776pp, 451 colour and B&W figures and plates, 213 tables, hb, ISBN 978-1-905905-37-9, £29.95

This is the third and final volume in a three-part series investigating the archaeology of an extensive stretch of gravel terrace and floodplain beside the River Thames west of Oxford. Whilst the previous two volumes report on the Iron Age, Roman and post-Roman periods, this volume covers the Neolithic and Bronze Age. The excavations were carried out in the 1990s by Oxford Archaeology and the entire project was funded by English Heritage since planning permission for gravel extraction had been granted without appropriate provision being made for an archaeological mitigation strategy.

The book has a slightly unusual structure. After the introduction, a series of synthetic chapters cover settlement and landscape, Neolithic and Bronze Age society, artefacts and crafts, and food production and consumption, finalised by a full synthesis of the entire pre-Iron Age sequence in Chapter 6. In conventional reports, these five overview chapters would come at the end but here they are followed by seven chapters describing the results of excavations each site or group of sites within the land-take of Yarnton. The book closes with a chapter on radiocarbon dating and 15 methodological appendices.

Since many of the areas selected for large-scale excavation were selected on the basis of the density and survival of later prehistoric and historical remains, Yarnton provides a significant window into a relatively dispersed Neolithic and Bronze Age landscape. With no evidence for Mesolithic settlement in this part of the Thames Valley, Yarnton's prehistoric sequence begins with Early Neolithic colonisation, continuing with relatively dispersed traces of occupation and occasional monument construction. The archaeological evidence of structures, monuments, pits, middens and palaeochannels, with a wide range of artefacts from ceramics and lithics to faunal remains, waterlogged wood and environmental evidence, is surprisingly rich.

Although there are several monumental structures and occasional burials, the research gives us a remarkable insight into a non-funerary farming landscape of the type that might be generally imagined away from the monument complexes that are found elsewhere in the Thames Valley

and on the chalk downs to the south. This is a useful and important contrast to the prehistoric monument complexes elsewhere along the Thames Valley and on the chalk downs to the south.

The relatively good survival of archaeological features within the floodplain, protected from deep cultivation, has allowed for the recovery of postholes of various Neolithic and Bronze Age houses, including numerous circular and oval Middle–Late Bronze Age examples. Yet it is the Neolithic structures that are most significant, the largest being formed of a mass of postholes in a rectilinear arrangement. This somewhat enigmatic structure is thought to be a house or more likely a sequence of houses, perhaps as many as three, built and rebuilt on the same spot. Some of its postholes held substantial timbers, over 0.3m in diameter, so it was certainly a substantial building. The cleanness of the fills of the post pipes and the refusal of the plan of massed postholes to make sense as one or more house plans gives pause for thought as to exactly what kind of a ‘house’ this was. Nonetheless, as with the rest of the volume, the reporting on this structure is detailed and immaculate, no doubt providing food for thought for years to come about the complexities of interpreting Neolithic dwelling.

Although the authors are entirely correct to identify Yarnton as a primarily non-funerary landscape, it does include a variety of funerary deposits from single inhumation burials to small caches of human remains. The latter are perhaps the most interesting because they include often tiny quantities of cremated remains placed in postholes and pits, especially in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. This observation may help to explain why prehistoric cremation burials are almost always underweight: the adult human skeleton is reduced to about 1.6 kg after cremation but burials of cremated bone weigh half of this on average. Perhaps the parcels of cremated bone at Yarnton, all under 625 g and many consisting of just a few grams, represent those divided-off portions selected for dispersal away from more formalised funerary and burial locations.

The volume is full of information on all aspects of the long-term use of this riverine landscape from sporadic traces of Neolithic settlement to the remains of corduroy trackways of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age. Whereas the traces of later Bronze Age settlement have been preserved in the form of post settings and field ditches, it seems that most of the occupation areas of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age have survived only as pit clusters and midden spreads. Without large areas of intact old ground surface, it seems that only in a few exceptional circumstances could building plans be recovered. Nonetheless, this is a remarkable record of a landscape through time, superbly documented thanks to the skills of the research team and the financial and organisational support of English Heritage (now Historic England). It shows the level of international excellence that commercial archaeological projects can reach if given the time and resources to bring them to successful conclusion.

This type of monograph is the bedrock of archaeological recording. Such major projects are enormously difficult to bring to full publication, and Gill Hey and her team are to be

congratulated on completing what must have seemed at times like a never-ending task of nightmarish complexity. It is an excellent volume, extremely thorough in all aspects of its coverage, which will be of interest to British and European prehistorians as well as to palaeo-environmentalists and landscape historians. Congratulations to all involved for this admirable conclusion to an impressive set of volumes!

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