



## Book Reviews

### **PRESERVED IN THE PEAT. AN EXTRAORDINARY BRONZE AGE BURIAL ON WHITEHORSE HILL, DARTMOOR, AND ITS WIDER CONTEXT BY ANDY M. JONES**

*Oxbow Books. 2016. 290pp, 234 illus (many in colour), 21 tables, ISBN 978-1-78570-260-0, hb, £30.00*

At first sight the title of this excellently produced and informative book says it all but at another level, it does not. True, the site was preserved in the peat, but is it extraordinary? The cist certainly is not; it is fairly standard. The cremation deposit of a young adult is nothing to be excited about. There are associated organic artefacts but is this extraordinary? I keep having to remind undergraduates about how much is missing from the material culture of prehistoric societies and illustrate this with some of George Catlin's 19th-century paintings of native Americans' highly decorated organic artefacts including clothing. Surely it is to be expected that Bronze Age people in Britain also had an extensive range of perishable artefacts, no doubt highly decorated, and possibly also body art such as piercings and tattoos: after all, items of personal adornment are well known in this period. It should come as no surprise then that the cremated remains of this young person were accompanied by and contained within organic artefacts. The burial may be completely ordinary.

That, of course, is the pedant talking. What makes this burial extraordinary is not that it was accompanied, but by the degree of preservation of those accompaniments and for that we thank the peat. As well as providing rich palaeoenvironmental data we have an animal pelt, a textile and skin item, wooden studs, a basket, a composite necklace and a braided hair band with tin studs and a utilised flake. Needless to say that in most other environments only the last three items would have survived (minus the braided hair) and the burial would have been interesting, but not extraordinary.

This is an excavation report. Jones takes us through the history of the project from its discovery to its excavation and the complexities of the post-excavation analyses. The story is that sometime probably around the middle of the 17th century BC, the remains of a young adult had been cremated on a pyre of oak kindled with hazel. Burnt textile fragments suggest that the corpse was clothed or in a shroud. The incomplete remains (less of the skull survived that might have been expected) were then placed in a cist constructed within an area of upland grazing comprising grass and heather moorland dotted with woodland stands. The floor of the cist had been covered with a matting of moorland grasses, the cremated bone had been wrapped in a bear pelt, secured by a copper alloy pin, and laid on top of a composite item made of nettle-fibre textile and animal skin with beaded seams and chevron fringes. The pelt and cremated remains were overlain by a lime bast basket which contained the other grave goods. Not forgetting the flint flake, they comprised two pairs of wooden studs, a composite necklace of shale, amber, fired clay and tin, and a bracelet or armband of braided cattle hair adorned with tin studs. Whether these artefacts belonged to the deceased or whether they represent gifts from the attendants at the deposition we shall never know (the

artefacts may say more about the living than the dead) but they demonstrate a conscious, accumulation of artefacts neatly contained and deliberately deposited. This Bronze Age individual then rested in pieces and in peace until AD 2011.

Jones has assembled an impressive group of specialists to deal with the complexities of the cist contents and the wealth of organic and other data. Each contributor provides detailed descriptions and discussions of the artefacts and eco-facts and the methodologies of their analyses. This is the indulgence available within a monograph and much of the methodological detail would have been edited out of a journal article with reference only to the archive reports. It must be said, that much of the descriptive methodologies may only be of interest to other specialists and I suspect that the majority of readers of this book will skip to each chapter conclusion then devour the extensive and extremely well-written *deus ex machina* that is Jones's discussion and conclusion. This not only provides the concise excavation results but also the context of the site involving a comprehensive survey of Bronze Age Dartmoor and a national corpus of organic materials from Bronze Age burials. Some excellent photographs of the reconstructions of the grave goods illustrate the stunning colours of the originals (though it is a pity that one of the replica wooden studs is out of focus). The volume is lavishly illustrated in full colour though some photographs of the organics seem to be working laboratory shots and as such the detail can be difficult to discern (compare for example the excellent fig 3.23 with fig 18.1). But this is detail.

Occasionally there are archaeological finds that leave us in awe and seriously affect our understanding of prehistory – Ötzi the iceman, the salt-preserved artefacts from Hallstatt. The Whitehorse Hill cist is one of those finds. The organic artefacts, combining animal and vegetable materials, with complex weaves and beaded leatherwork serve to remind us of the craft skills and art of these past populations. The colourful jewellery

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