



Book Reviews

CEREMONIAL LIVING IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM BC: EXCAVATIONS AT RINGLEMERE SITE M1, KENT, 2002–2006 BY KEITH PARFITT AND STUART NEEDHAM

British Museum Research Publication 217, London. 2020. 342pp, 146 figs, 73 tables, 47 plates (51 pages in colour), pb, ISBN 9780861592173, £40.00

The discovery in 2001 by a metal detectorist of the now famous gold cup from Ringlemere Farm in east Kent prompted a four-year survey and excavation project led by the British Museum. This volume provides a detailed assessment of M1, the barrow where the gold cup was found, focusing particularly on the extraordinary Late Neolithic ritual and occupation site that lay preserved beneath the barrow. Readers will no doubt have bells ringing in their memories – has this site not been published before? A preliminary account of the site was published in 2006 (Needham *et al.* 2006), once freely available online but now seemingly only through the National Archive web archive service since the British Museum revamped their website. That volume included a chapter on excavations at the barrow, with a detailed comparison to other similar Late Neolithic henge sites. However, this new volume presents the site for the first time in detail, superseding the account and discussion in that earlier volume, which otherwise largely focused on the gold cup itself. It should be noted that, despite 342 pages of densely packed data and discussion, this new volume does not include the extensive Anglo-Saxon cemetery of 60 graves and a sunken-featured building discovered at the site, nor the excavation of nearby round barrow M3; both await future publications. Setting out the relationship between the existing and future publications of the project would have been helpful to orientate readers, as would a more detailed contents list, and a list of figures, plates, and tables.

The book is one of the British Museum's exemplary research publications, written by Keith Parfitt, an archaeologist with nearly 50 years' experience excavating in his native Kent, and Dr Stuart Needham, retired British Museum curator and Bronze Age specialist extraordinaire. A high quality of archaeological excavation, reporting and discussion is therefore to be expected, and the volume does not disappoint in this respect. The maps and illustrations are exemplary and there are many clear photographs. A meticulous description and assessment of every archaeological feature in each of the pre-mound (Chapter 2), enclosure and mound (Chapter 3) and post-mound (Chapter 4) phases is followed by valuable specialist reports (Chapter 5), an interpretation of the site's 17 phases (Chapter 6) and a comprehensive discussion (Chapter 7).

M1 is the largest ring ditch, some 50 m in total diameter, in a cluster of seven round barrows or ring ditches at Ringlemere Farm, located above the head of the Durlock Stream. The barrow itself was tricky to excavate due to difficult brickearth soils, multiple animal burrows and acidic conditions leading to the loss of unburnt bone, making samples for radiocarbon dating something of a rarity. The barrow was almost completely excavated over multiple seasons, with features having to be matched between a series of eight trenches. The perseverance was worthwhile, however, for the excavations revealed a remarkable array of 230 pre-mound features dating to the Late Neolithic, including a horseshoe of pits forming a ceremonial structure and several phases of intensive occupation. At first sight, as the excavators admit, the features are chaotic and bewildering, but readers are taken through the evidence sector by sector, before each logical step of deciphering the grouping of features and their chronological sequence is explained. Not every argument was entirely convincing to this reader, but faith must be placed in the excavators who know this site so intimately, and the wealth of detail will allow re-interpretation by others. Key findings of the specialist analyses, such as details about the pottery types or archaeobotanical results are deftly integrated into the description, comparative sites discussed and even reconstructions provided, to help visualise the various features of the site. Much effort has gone into mapping the patterns of flintwork and pottery distribution across the site and comparing these to the various feature groups. Nevertheless, reading the report takes some effort, involving flipping backwards and forwards between plans and descriptions, thumbs and fingers in place, sometimes following the myriad numbers and feature groups with difficulty. Nevertheless, a coherent story emerges.

Aside from a scatter of Mesolithic flints, the earliest feature on the site is an 11–12 m arc of stakeholes dated by a carbonised stake tip to 3770–3645 cal BC, the Early Neolithic. After a gap of some centuries, a horseshoe setting of 16 pits was dug, with some associated central pits and postholes. The identification of these 16 pits as postholes is somewhat tentative, given their shallow depths and lack of surviving postpipes, but the interpretation as a post structure is preferred by the excavators and becomes somewhat definite. There is no direct dating for the horseshoe, but a later hearth that overlay one of the pits contained burnt bone dating to 2885–2640 cal BC, suggesting it was built prior to 2640 cal BC.

Contemporary with and post-dating this horseshoe setting are a number of feature groups, including three sub-rectangular hearths with associated post settings, a series of post arcs and lines, a number of intercutting pits, and a central 'cove', two L-shaped settings for timber uprights. These features are associated with masses of abraded Grooved Ware pottery, burnt and worked flint, hazelnut shell, fruit and cereal remains, and some burnt bone. The hearths, with severely burnt rims, had evidently been heated to high temperatures. Whether these features represent a typical domestic settlement or are the result of ritual activities associated with the horseshoe

setting is a question explored in the discussion. There is even a somewhat speculative interpretation of the space as used for initiation ceremonies based on the symmetrical division of the horseshoe, with the hearth-focused activity areas restricted to one half. The conclusion reached is that this was ostensibly a ceremonial complex setting for routine-looking elements of architecture, hence the phrase 'ceremonial living' used in the volume's title. Given how little we know about Late Neolithic domestic structures, this is an important site for the debate about our categorisation of ritual vs domestic, but to this reader the site appeared to be rather more domestic in character, with only a few aspects (the earlier horseshoe of pits and the later central cove) to suggest otherwise. As the authors say, it is salutary to imagine what would have remained of this site if the barrow had not protected it from the plough; just a flint scatter with a few crumbs of pottery and perhaps a few pits and postholes – perhaps interpreted as a typical Late Neolithic settlement site.

Small quantities of fragmented Beaker pottery were found distributed across the site, with their patterning showing both continuity with, and some differences to, the distribution of Grooved Ware. Here we have important evidence for transitional period at the end of the Late Neolithic, although the Beaker pottery appears to largely post-date Needham's fission horizon. Afterwards, there was a shift in depositional practice, with three pits containing complete Beakers. These probably accompanied inhumations, but the lack of surviving bones precludes firm interpretation of these pits as graves. One of these vessels preserved an interesting impression of a woven vegetable fibre textile made of flax or hemp. Also assigned to this phase is a central timber cove, some further pits forming an 'avenue' and a tentative early ring ditch, for which no direct evidence exists but is argued to be present based on the spatial arrangements of pits and the continuity of features in the centre of the site. Potential evidence for this possible earlier ring ditch (or hengiform enclosure) is carefully examined but is ultimately inconclusive.

The barrow was constructed over the occupation site and Beaker 'graves' in about 2200 BC. The core was a turf mound, in which the original sods could be seen, and which contained c. 14,000 struck flints, 34,000 burnt flints and almost 2000 sherds of pottery, clearly stripped from the ground in the immediate vicinity. This turf mound was capped from clean orange-brown clay from further afield and surrounded by a ditch, the fills of which contained only Early Bronze Age flintwork. Finally, much later in the Bronze Age, the gold cup and two amber objects (which stimulated this entire research project) were placed in a grave or ritual pit dug into the top of the barrow, at a date between 1950 and 1700 BC, based on the date of the cup. A post façade in a slot on top of the mound was placed in a similar position to the earlier cove below.

The individual specialist reports provide more detail. Healy's analysis of the 47,802 pieces of struck flint was clearly a mammoth task, including detailed mapping of the distribution of key tool

types across the site. A full range of Neolithic flintworking was represented, with no specialisation of tasks and little evidence for prestige flintwork. Her excellent discussion provides a useful overview of changing flint tools and flint working techniques, as well as contemporary pottery types, throughout the Neolithic period, bringing in comparisons to other sites and assemblages. Gibson's assessment of the pottery is equally valuable, although analysis was hampered by the abraded condition of many of the sherds and a lack of rims. One must question, however, whether 14 pages of flint tables and 26 pages of Grooved Ware pottery catalogue needed to be printed in full, given the ease with which organisations like the Archaeological Data Service can hold and make available these sorts of archives digitally, without felling trees. The assessment of plant remains from the site shows the value of widespread sampling on such complex prehistoric sites, giving a fine-grained picture of relative changes in the abundant quantities of hazelnut shell fragments, as well as pulses, fruits, weed seeds, cereals and chaff fragments. More direct dating of some of these plant remains would have been helpful, especially a potentially early example of Celtic bean, particularly as there were so few suitable radiocarbon dating samples. Although the archaeomagnetic dating of Hearth I and OSL dating on the site provides an interesting methodology, the wide confidence ranges of their results do not help to refine the site sequence.

The useful discussion chapter compares the Ringlemere Late Neolithic occupation site with henge monuments such as Balfarg, Coneybury and Stonehenge; horseshoe settings at Bryn Celli Ddu, Cairnpapple and North Mains; and domestic structures found under round barrows elsewhere, such as Trelystan, Upper Ninepence as well as the settlement at Durrington Walls. Another closely comparable site not mentioned is the Late Neolithic occupation outside Newgrange passage tomb in Ireland, where occupation was similarly focused on a series of sub-rectangular hearths with associated stakehole arcs and settings (Smyth 2014, fig 5.15).

To conclude, this volume provides an immensely significant and comprehensive record of the Ringlemere barrow and occupation site. The site provides an important case study in debates about the categorisation of sites, in discussions of the transition between the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, and as an example of re-use of a persistent place over a long timescale. One hopes that the British Museum remain committed to producing such labour intensive and expensive research publications in the future, despite the impacts of Covid-19 on income and pressing priorities elsewhere; someone must set the standard.

References

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