



Book Reviews

SCOTLAND IN LATER PREHISTORIC EUROPE EDITED BY F HUNTER AND I RALSTON

Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Edinburgh, 2015. 301pp, 141 illus incl 30+ col plates, 32 B/W plates, 10 tables (many colour). ISBN 978-1-908332066, hb, £60

This volume represents the proceedings of a conference held in 2008: one of a series designed to provide a wider European context for the archaeology of Scotland. It contains fifteen papers which address this question. The book is divided into two sections: the first group of four papers examine the archaeology of the near continent; France, the Low Countries and southern Scandinavia. The second group of ten papers discuss the archaeology of Scotland; they cover topics such as the landscape and environment, societies of 'Central Britain', Bronze Age houses, hillforts, 'Atlantic Roundhouses', craft working and 'Celtic Art'.

In the first group Cunliffe produces a general survey promoting the importance of seafaring in western Europe, but does not deal with many of the detailed problems that arise from a close consideration of the evidence. The approach contrasts dramatically with that of the following paper by Milicent, which examines the Late Bronze Age (LBA) of Atlantic Europe in detail. Milicent distances himself from the generally accepted model of the Atlantic Bronze Age by arguing that this is largely an elite phenomenon that masks a region with little underlying unity, which cannot be regarded as distinctly different to other LBA regions in Europe. Warmenbol provides a detailed consideration of the evidence from the southern Low Countries, which again highlights the variation in the changing nature of the contacts between Atlantic and central European zones in this easily accessible region. This European section of the book is completed by a contribution by Kaul that covers the evidence for ritual activity in southern Scandinavia. This paper is very different to the previous papers in its theoretical perspective. Kaul argues for the existence of complex Bronze Age cosmology, which we have a rare opportunity to access because of the use of a visual iconography that can be deciphered. The paper argues that ritual practice changes dramatically in this region with the onset of the Iron Age and that any reading back of later historical myths into the Bronze Age would be a mistake. This is an important conclusion that should be borne in mind in relation to the routine use of Irish sources to reconstruct Iron Age societies.

All of these papers have one thing in common they are only of peripheral relevance to an understanding of the Later Prehistory of Scotland. They are good papers but other than the occasional vague references to the Atlantic networks of exchange there is nothing directly relevant to Scotland. Given the significance often placed on the Atlantic networks it is surprising that there is no contribution from Spain and no examination of the evidence in Welsh or Cornish archaeology.

The British section of the volume begins with a paper by Tipping on the landscape and environment that is wide ranging and has important implications. In it he explores, and largely dismisses, the argument for a major social catastrophe caused by climate deterioration at the end of the Late Bronze Age. Instead he proposes a rational readjustment of the exploitation of the landscape, where the farmers in the uplands decided to cease crop growing and relocated to the lowlands whose communities were invigorated by this event. The underlying theme is for a

rational and planned reorganisation of the landscape. In the following 500 years there was a major transformation of south and central Scotland that involved a wholesale clearance of the remaining woodland. These landscapes were 'fully used to generate surpluses' possibly due to the development of 'regionally powerful tribal systems' (page 111). This argument suggests a very different Iron Age to that presented by the other authors in the volume. They generally argue for small scale local communities with little evidence for the complex hierarchies that would be required to plan the major restructuring of the landscape suggested by Tipping. Haselgrove in his discussion of lowland settlement in exactly the same area as Tipping is quite explicit '....tribal groupings with fixed identities and/or centralised institutions such as kingship – if they had any reality outside our reading of fragmentary Roman texts - were an exception not the rule...' (page 131).

The Scottish section is a mixed bag. There are some papers which go over old ground and provide adequate summaries of issues that the authors have discussed in much greater depth in previous papers. These provides a useful summary to readers unfamiliar with the archaeology of Scotland but the coverage is patchy. Ralston's survey of the hillforts of Scotland is rather undermined by the total lack of an illustration; surely it would have been helpful to provide some plans or even aerial photographs, particularly as the importance of the landscape setting is one of the points stressed in the paper. The lack of illustrations in this paper contrasts markedly with that by Megaw, which is packed with many excellent object photographs. This reader would debate the validity of some of the interpretations presented by Armit on the chronology and the symbolic significance of the brochs, and Pope, on the cosmological significance of houses, but these are old arguments, which are partially critiqued elsewhere in the volume.

There are also some papers that provide new interpretations and new data. Goldberg provides a critical analysis of the concepts of belief and ritual. This begins with a straightforward critical appraisal of the idea of Celtic religion, the misuse of the term Druid and the uncritical assumption that the archaeology indicates a common set of beliefs covering a large swathe of central Europe. He goes on to explore other controversial topics such as the cosmological significance of houses which he finds convincing despite the recent flawed critiques. He also highlights the distinctively Scottish interest in underground chambers; this is now well attested by recent work on caves, souterrains and Mine Howe, and could perhaps have been discussed in more detail. He concludes with a discussion of some famous Scottish discoveries, the figure from Ballachulish and the cauldron deposits at Carlingwark and Blackburn Mills. These deposits are famous because they can easily be fitted into a Celtic mythology which is so prevalent in popular literature but which ignores much of the local context of their respective deposition. It is this contextual approach that he recommends for the study of belief and ritual.

Hunter provides an interesting consideration of craft working in Scotland, which demonstrates the possibility of carefully assessing and integrating old and new excavations, in order to make sensible observations on the material culture of Iron Age Scotland. In his discussion of the evidence for iron production he suggests that there is a major distinction between the widespread presence of iron working in Atlantic Scotland and its relative rarity in southern Scotland. This is an important observation and it could have been placed in a wider context, particularly in relation to theoretical considerations of the ritual significance of iron working made by authors such as Hingley and Giles. However, a significant gap in this paper is the lack of a detailed consideration of bone and antler working. This is a technology which is very well represented in Scotland, and a detailed analysis of the products and the waste has the potential to offer many important technical and social insights that would have a wider European significance.

One of the problems encountered by the authors in this volume is that Scotland does not really show any significant interaction with continental Europe after the end of the Bronze Age. This

point is examined in some detail in the final paper by Halliday, which acts as a conclusion to the volume. He convincingly argues that if you want to place the archaeology of the region in a continental context it has to be done by addressing theoretical concepts rather than undertaking regional synthesis. The Scottish evidence can contribute to European discussions on houses, the significance of individuals, the role of high status metalwork, the significance of deposition and human sacrifice, and others and these themes cross cut regional and cultural boundaries. The quality of the archaeological evidence from Scotland is excellent and the amount of work done on these topics deserves to be better known.

Niall Sharples
University of Cardiff

Review submitted: September 2016

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