



Book Reviews

THE MAKING OF PREHISTORIC WILTSHIRE BY DAVID FIELD AND DAVID McOMISH WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE SPELLER

Amberley Publishing, Stroud. 2017. 160pp, 30 figs, 37 colour plates, pb, ISBN 978-1-4456-4841-5, £16.99

This small and attractive book is a welcome addition to our growing knowledge of Wiltshire's prehistory. It aims to tell the story of Wiltshire's prehistoric landscape from the Lower Palaeolithic to the end of the Iron Age in a condensed format of eight chapters.

Its introductory chapter covers the county's geology, topography and history of archaeological research. The following six chapters take the reader through the main chronological periods, starting with the Palaeolithic; Wiltshire's earliest traces of human activity are revealed by finds of Acheulian hand-axes in river gravels from around 300,000 years ago. Without any known *in situ* occupation deposits from the Lower Palaeolithic in the county, the narrative draws on sites such as Boxgrove in Sussex and Happisburgh in Norfolk to provide a chronological and contextual framework into which the Wiltshire finds and their find spots can be fitted.

Chapter 3 – the making of Wiltshire landscape – takes the reader through the early Holocene, examining the climatic and vegetational changes after the last Ice Age and documenting the sites of Mesolithic hunter-gatherers within the watersheds of the Thames, Bristol Avon and Salisbury Avon. The authors point out that Mesolithic activity was not restricted to the river valleys but also extended to the higher ground such as Salisbury Plain.

Wiltshire is, of course, world-famous for Stonehenge and Avebury and their associated Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments. Chapters 4 and 5 cover this extraordinary period, splitting it into the earlier Neolithic ('Claiming tenure: the first monuments') and the later Neolithic and Early Bronze Age ('Worshipping the land: excessive monumentality'). The growing significance of land tenure, materialised by the construction of long barrows and other monuments as ancestral land claims, is the key theme of the first of these two chapters which explores different local landscapes and various types of monuments from causewayed enclosures to cursuses, finishing with a short section on the little we still know about settlements. As the title of Chapter 5 hints with its slightly disparaging tone, the 'excessive' monuments of the third and early second millennia BC are given somewhat short shrift. This is nice to see, given that Stonehenge and Avebury are themselves the subject of so many books and occupy so much mental space amongst prehistorians and public alike; how refreshing to side-line them here in order to devote more room to the Late Neolithic environment, other types of monuments, houses, pits and stones, Beaker sites, and round barrows.

The changes in land use towards the end of the Early Bronze Age around 1900 BC and during the Middle Bronze Age – the subject of Chapter 6 – are presented as a major transformation in which Wiltshire's rural pattern today of fields and farms originally emerged over the course of some 40 generations during the Bronze Age. This agrarian transformation has been written about by many authors over several decades but it is still unrecognised by many non-specialists for the long revolution that it was. This was the seminal moment in the making of the Wiltshire landscape and, indeed, of rural landscapes across southern Britain. The chapter takes the reader through the different classes of evidence: farms, field systems, enclosures, ponds and linear earthworks, ending with a review of what processes drove this transformation.

The chapter on the Iron Age ('Protecting the land: forts, farms, people and landscape') adopts a similar run-through of classes of evidence, notably hillforts, enclosed and unenclosed settlements, hilltop enclosures and fields. It begins with the remarkable 'monumental midden' sites of the Vale of Pewsey which have been a particular research field of Field and McOmish in recent years. These enormous and deep spreads of Early Iron Age domestic waste have perplexed prehistorians on account of the sheer quantities of refuse accumulated over relatively short intervals with no evident prehistoric villages or towns to have generated them. Quantities of food remains within East Chisenbury midden are estimated to derive from annual consumption of 1400 sheep, 600 cows and 450 pigs, suggesting that such places were centres of feasting for thousands of people over a hundred years or more.

Field and McOmish end with an overview of Wiltshire prehistory that brings together the main threads of what they see as the changes and continuities. Repeated embellishment of particular sites and locations is one such process, not necessarily continuity since Bronze Age field systems might be reused in the Roman period without any evident period of use in between. The character of the land is recognised for its role in shaping human land use, especially the role of the valleys, but any such environmental factors that encouraged continuity are contrasted with major transformations such as the 'first agricultural revolution' of the Bronze Age.

This is a very handy book written by the two most knowledgeable landscape prehistorians working in Wiltshire today. Bringing years of experience of many different sites and landscapes, Field and McOmish have provided a useful condensation of our knowledge of Wiltshire prehistory, presenting a narrative of the long term peppered with descriptions of hundreds of sites of all periods. Some readers might find site descriptions overly brief and the text in parts turning into something of a list, but the result is an accessible and portable book that can be thumbed through by both specialist and general reader. There were certainly sections where I wanted to learn more about particular sites. On the other hand, there is merit in keeping the book short and succinct, working to a template of explaining landscape organisation at the book's core by drawing upon so many examples to make their case. This book is an admirable summary of some three centuries of archaeological research which provides both useful reference signposts for the specialist and an introductory read for those wondering what else may have gone on in Wiltshire before the Romans other than building Avebury and Stonehenge.

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Review submitted: September 2017

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