



Book Reviews

TWICE-CROSSED RIVER: PREHISTORIC AND PALAEOENVIRONMENTAL INVESTIGATIONS AT BARLEYCROFT FARM/OVER, CAMBRIDGESHIRE BY CHRIS EVANS WITH JONATHAN TABOR AND MARK VANDER LINDEN

McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2016. 639pp, 298 col and B&W illus, 177 tables, hb, ISBN 9781902937755, £40.00

This book really comes into the monumental category itself. Both its physical form and content are large, impressive and weighty. The volume covers two decades of excavation and research into a series of sites on the banks of the Great Ouse at Over. It is increasingly rare now to find an archaeological team able to systematically investigate a section of landscape in this manner, combining topographic and palaeoecological analysis, with the stratigraphy and artefactual datasets, and as such, this volume is an important contribution to landscape studies.

The book is divided by geographic area, taking a series of ridges within the river system in turn, examining Mesolithic to Iron Age monuments, human remains, artefacts and ecofacts, providing a detailed examination of the specific areas excavated over the duration of the project. Not, however, in conventional reporting manner, thank goodness, but examining the last of the fieldwork first, and rather than listing out every scrap of Mesolithic, then Neolithic *ad infinitum* across the entire study area, a series of stories of the topographic zones has been told. The geographically distinct chapters are tied together by several introductory chapters and one final discussion chapter which contains a series of themed essays. Data and information proliferate, but make no mistake; this is a profoundly scholarly paean to rivers, and the Great Ouse in particular, created by a team of dozens of archaeologists.

The introductory chapters outline the fieldwork and the approaches taken to it, as a series of campaigns driven as a result of gravel extraction at Over, Barleycroft Farm and the Narrows on the Fen edge. The project forms part of a glorious trinity with the Haddenham and Colne Fen projects, published earlier in the Cambridge McDonald Institute series. Evans discusses sampling, and site selection, admitting that a decision was taken possibly to sample less than one would now, but concentrate on undertaking really top class fieldwork in those areas selected. This is a concern; what is missing? In such a rich archaeological landscape, it is

unlikely that extensive blank patches exist. Was anything lost that could profoundly affect the understanding of the sites? However, it is important to weigh this against the difficulties of negotiating successful projects in mineral extraction sites now, let alone in the early 1990s. The focus in this volume of clearly examining and reconstructing the histories of select topographic zones provides narratives of a group of locales; perhaps in a better regulated time, additional locales could have been examined and published; however, the new understanding created through the fieldwork and analysis remains immense.

From the outset, the reader is challenged to consider how perceptions of riverine and deltaic landscapes have evolved, both before and after the development of illustration and mapping. For the majority of archaeologists reading the volume, this will be a new and difficult approach, given the unrelenting training and experience of creating and using traditional maps, plans and elevations. But the authors try to break us away from this rigidity to consider how the landscapes in question were understood and, viewed throughout time, rather than presenting a straightforward narrative of phased evidence, as is the norm, particularly with developer-funded archaeology, where the time and funds are increasingly rarely available for anything else.

Rather than discuss the entire volume, an example is taken, based on the Mesolithic treatment of the first zone; this is the Godwin Ridge, over half a kilometre long and presenting the highest ridge in the Narrows' (at +3.0m OD!). This commanding location contains evidence from the Mesolithic through the Iron Age, however, the 'surface' nature of occupation and data recovery and huge numbers of finds (nearly 70,000) compared to relatively few cut features (<700) clearly caused issues of sampling, phasing and interpretation, which are unpicked at the outset of the chapter in conjunction with discussion of specialist survey techniques including magnetic susceptibility. Extensive soil micromorphological analysis is used to describe the soils across, and processes acting upon the ridge, both natural and agricultural. Artefact distribution within the various soil types and process areas is outlined, along with the drawbacks of some of the recovery methods of test-pitting and sieving.

Another advantage of the long term nature of this fieldwork project is that time for weathering and exposure allowed for contemplation of erosion dynamics and finds recovery, and this is examined through a series of commentaries on Field Experiments, which will be of great interest to anyone interested in taphonomy, formation processes, creating effective sampling strategies and the biases associated with finds recovery. It's a great delight to see these important aspects of fieldwork properly examined and unpicked, strengthening the ability for the reader to fully understand the conditions and consider the interpretations provided by the authors.

The Mesolithic scatters and finds (approximately 15,000) are disturbed and reworked to a degree, making interpretation difficult, but this is handled extremely well by Lawrence Billington, who gives the material strong context, referring to the earliest work on the site, by Godwin himself, and also by comparison with other East Anglian sites, including Lackford Heath, Peacock's Farm and Two Mile Bottom. The patterns across the Ridge are unpicked, clearly identifying the effects of ridge formation and change and subsequent re-deposition of the assemblages, as well as actual human input. It is acknowledged that the lack of environmental data from this period is a significant drawback, but the author draws on published material from nearby, to suggest an ecosystem in which the Mesolithic use of this area was taking place. It is very satisfying to see Godwin's work woven in again here.

The analysis of the Godwin Ridge continues, with extensive Neolithic and Bronze Age features and finds, although the Iron Age is separated into a chapter, which is slightly jarring. Just this one ridge would make for a fantastic read, of microscopic scrutiny, not just of the findings, but the approach to fieldwork and a forensic analysis of the shortcomings and strengths of each line of approach. But this volume then does it all over and over again for the O'Connell Ridge, the Marlow Ridge and the Low Grounds Terrace-Island, concluding by bringing the whole together, whilst providing the reader with huge scope to consider for themselves the datasets generated and presented here, and once more, the huge team of archaeologists must be acknowledged.

The volume is thoroughly illustrated, with many fantastic full colour photos of fieldwork including beautiful photos of the sample grids, pottery, black and white technical photos, line drawings, plans, sections, tables etc, but also includes an intriguing series of experimental images, 'Dendritics' created with the artist Issam Kourbaj. This is a great example of an important interpretative collaboration between archaeologists and artists, and something that hopefully will be seen increasingly in books and exhibitions.

I cannot conclude this review better than to quote from Richard Bradley's foreword to *Twice-crossed River*, '*If it has the influence that it and its companion volumes deserve, prehistoric archaeology cannot be the same again.*'

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