



## Book Reviews

### **WESTWARD ON THE HIGH-HILLED PLAINS. THE LATER PREHISTORY OF THE WEST MIDLANDS (THE MAKING OF THE WEST MIDLANDS VOLUME 2) EDITED BY DEREK HURST**

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It is now over 20 years since English Heritage initiated the regional research frameworks. In this time the different regions have moved at a different pace and in different formats to disseminate the results of the framework exercise. This volume is the second regional research assessment to come from the West Midlands and looks at the later prehistory of the region from the beginning of the Bronze Age to the end of the Iron Age. In contrast to other regions (for example the East of England and the East Midlands) the assessment volumes are following the publication of the research agenda and strategy (Hurst 2011). As is often the case the original papers were given some time ago at a seminar in 2002 and have then been through revisions until 2009 with some refinement until 2011. As is the case with the current speed of commercial archaeology volumes such as these are usually out of date before they reach the book shelves.

Having said that this is a very attractive volume with a good range of interesting chapters. Niall Sharples introduces the volume by looking at the characteristics of the region which like many others is defined by counties which do not always neatly fit into topographical and geological zones. Niall points out the dichotomy west to east between the hillfort-rich landscapes of the Welsh border counties and the small enclosures of the low-lying Staffordshire and Warwickshire river valleys and a north-south division exemplified by the richer material culture of Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Warwickshire to the south compared with that of Shropshire and Staffordshire to the north. This introductory chapter touches on wider thematic research questions and immediately highlights the significance and potential of the region.

To follow on Elizabeth Pearson looks at the environmental evidence of the region and how farming patterns in later prehistory may have developed. Again as in other regions the West Midlands suffers from poor animal bone survival so the pastoral evidence comes from soil micromorphology and pollen profiles. These two chapters lay the basis for the more period/county based assessments to follow. Hal Dalwood (now sadly no longer with us) looks at the elusive evidence for Late Bronze Age settlement in the region while Mike Hodder builds on his pioneering work on burnt mounds in Birmingham and the Black Country. The Bronze Age and Iron Age of different parts of the region then follow with Warwickshire and Solihull (Stuart Palmer), Herefordshire (Peter Darling, Keith Ray and Paul White), Shropshire (Andy Wigley), Staffordshire (Chris Wardle) and Worcestershire (Derek Hurst).

The material culture is then discussed in three chapters with Annette Hancocks looking at the ceramic evidence, Angie Bolton highlighting the evidence from the Portable Antiquities Scheme and Derek Hurst analysing production and trade. In the final chapter Andy Wigley provides an overview of Iron Age landscapes and settlement in the region.

So how has this volume contributed to our understanding of the later prehistory of the region?

Some duplication is inevitable between the chapters dealing with different counties with similar conclusions on the potential for the study of later prehistory. Like many other regions visibility has been and still is a challenge. This is exemplified by Mike Hodder's chapter on Birmingham and the Black Country where he has demonstrated that by using the right techniques 'burnt mounds' can be located in the most built up and developed areas. The West Midlands has been at the forefront of the study of these enigmatic monuments and the rest of the country is now beginning to catch up. Like other areas of lowland Britain there is an imbalance with good visibility for later Iron Age settlements on the on the gravels of the river valleys (clearly demonstrated in Stuart Palmer's chapter) but poorer indication of the way the interfluves were exploited. The relatively thin distribution maps for Shropshire and Staffordshire reflect this problem and the need for area surveys is identified in Chris Wardle's Staffordshire chapter. Variations in the policies of the planning authorities in evaluating apparently blank areas is also a significant factor. Where this has been adopted in other regions the results have seen a dramatic increase in the identification of later Bronze and, in particular, Iron Age sites. In the East Midlands for example it might be predicted that an Iron Age site might be present on an average of every 1.8 sq km.

Another recurring theme from the county reviews is the problem of refining the chronology which is also recognised in Annette Hancock's chapter on the ceramic basis to the region where the need for more radiocarbon dating, noted in many of the county reviews, is re-iterated. The Portable Antiquities Scheme has added a new dimension to our understanding of the period and Angie Bolton's chapter highlights this. Perhaps the most significant treasure find in the region, two hoards of 1494 Iron Age coins from Pershore discovered in 1993 (Hurst and Leins 2013) is discussed in Derek Hurst's chapter on production and trade. This chapter points out how the material culture of the region can be an indicator of different affinities with north Shropshire having more in common with the northern Marches, Staffordshire with Leicestershire and Northamptonshire while much of Herefordshire and Worcestershire forms a cohesive area with parts of Gloucestershire.

All the chapters show the importance of local expertise as they have been written by authors with a particular knowledge of the region. It is perhaps the thematic chapters covering the region in general by Niall Sharples, Elizabeth Pearson, Hal Dalwood, Derek Hurst and Andy Wigley that make the greatest contribution. Later prehistory has arguably gone through the greatest changes in our perception since the introduction of PPG16 in 1990. The sheer quantity of evidence from lowland Britain for Iron Age settlements, for example, has totally changed our ideas about population, relationships between groups and hierarchies. This remarkable explosion of data is reflected in this volume and has helped to show a wide variation of landscape occupation in the region during this period. The volume has demonstrated how the region, despite its artificial boundaries, does have the potential to explore different landscape zones. Many of the chapters include other research agenda items in addition to those included in the previously published research agenda (Hurst 2011). This is welcomed as there is always a danger that the research agendas become too prescriptive and end up being box ticking exercises.

While this reviewer is always pleased to see an attractively illustrated hardback book I wonder if this is the right approach to the ever-changing picture in the light of such an explosion of information (some HERs have doubled in their number of records in the last 15 years). Other regional assessment volumes have dealt with the different periods for the region as a whole while this volume has retained the original county summaries albeit with some updating. However this approach has meant that there will in due course be six relatively expensive hard backed volumes where other regions' assessments have been in one volume which have reached publication at an earlier date. It is to be hoped that this run of volumes does see the light of day and doesn't 'run out of steam'.

## References

- Hurst, D. 2011. Middle Bronze Age to Iron Age: a research assessment overview and research agenda. In S Watts (ed.) *The Archaeology of the West Midlands: a Framework for Research*, 101–126. Oxford: Oxbow Books
- Hurst, D. & Leins, I. 2013. The Pershore hoards and votive deposition in the Iron Age. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 79, 297–325

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