



Book Reviews

WOODLAND IN THE NEOLITHIC OF NORTHERN EUROPE: THE FOREST AS ANCESTOR BY GORDON NOBLE

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 2017. 222pp, 50 B&W figs, hb, ISBN 978-1-107-15983-9, £75.00

In his new book Gordon Noble sets out to place the woodland back into the Neolithic narrative, both as environmental backdrop and as an active player. We are reminded that woodland, trees, and the timber taken from them, are living entities which grow, breathe, creak, distort, decay and shift within their own life cycle, which during the Neolithic became increasingly intertwined with that of the human beings who lived within and modified them. It is a thoughtful and thought-provoking study which touches on the sensory aspects of the woodlands, particularly in terms of sound and vision, although touch, taste and smell are sadly missing. The focus is on the social role of trees and woodland, the wood they produce, as structure, architecture and living entities with cosmological associations as well as the spaces within the woodland, building on ideas expressed by Austin (2000) and bringing together a broad range of current thinking and lines of evidence. While many of the ideas expressed are not original to Noble, the collation of the various lines of evidence and theoretical thought in one volume is a welcome undertaking. The forest as provider in terms of less permanent goods (fruits, leaves, fibre) is out of scope, although for the reader expecting a fuller discussion of Neolithic woodland this omission is likely to disappoint, while a more in-depth consideration of wood as a worked medium would have been a valuable addition.

The underlying premise of the book is that the woodland of the 4th and early 3rd millennia BC formed a dynamic and reflexive environment within which the new practices, lifeways, and material cultures of the Neolithic, took hold. Principal among these new practices was the need for, and the impact of, clearance and the felled trees themselves, and considerable focus is given to the practicalities and the potential significance, materiality and spirituality, of felling and clearance activities. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the practice of clearance with the insightful experimental work of the Draved Forest experiment (Iversen 1941; 1967) and the work on flint and groundstone axes of Deborah Olausson (1982; 1983). Much is made of the considerable scale of the effort involved in clearing areas of primary woodland, such that the act and spectacle of and communal effort required for clearance and movement of substantial timbers are perhaps of greater importance than the efficiency and engineering involved. This is carried through to the construction of monumental timber architecture in Chapter 7, with consideration of effort usually given to stone monuments applied to wooden ones.

Rather than a chronological journey through the Neolithic woodland, the narrative draws on palaeoecological, archaeological, historical, experimental and ethnographic lines of evidence to take a more schematic approach. A background introductory chapter covers the changing definitions and approaches to the study of woodland as environmental and social backdrop in the Neolithic from the purely scientific palaeoecological approaches of the earlier and mid-20th century to the experimental and the phenomenological approaches of Tilley (1994) and others, in which the palaeoecological evidence is often ignored. More recent thinking borrows much from social science and there is a greater effort to fully integrate and blend the human dimensions of landscape perception and understanding with the more detailed palaeoecological reconstructions (see for example Austin 2000). A concise and easy to follow palaeoecological review of northern Europe, covering the British Isles and Scandinavia is given in Chapter 2 in which the dynamic nature of the woodland is stressed, an aspect which is returned to throughout the book. Chapter 3

builds on the concept of the dynamic woodland and examines the physicality and practicalities of clearance, the character of the trees and behaviour of different taxa in terms of clearance, and the role of the polished stone axe, the 'smoking gun' for major Neolithic impacts (Kristiansen 1993, 249). The following character explores the more sensory aspects of experience of the woodland, the perception (visual and oral), understanding, and concepts of space and place within the landscape, drawing considerably on ethnographic evidence. The physical, architectural, and spiritual qualities of trees and timbers are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 in which the notion of 'lively' architectures and materials are raised, stressing the movement, changes, decay and even regrowth of trees within structures from timber causeways to houses to functional objects and the symbolic potential of 'living' timber and the significance of timber monumentality. Both the split timber settings within Early Neolithic long barrows, such as Fussell's Lodge, Wiltshire and Haddenham, Cambridgeshire, and the Late Neolithic monumentality of large palisaded enclosures and timber circles such as Durrington Walls South, are discussed in terms of their metaphorical representation of the life cycle in all its stages including death and decay (see for example Parker Pearson 2012). A short concluding chapter brings the book to a close. The narrative builds on the concepts introduced early in the book, returning repeatedly to the themes of trees as living agents and the blurred boundaries between the forest and humanly created environment or 'architecture', stressing that even the clearances themselves are aspects of that architecture, forming boundaries to the monuments. We are reminded several times that the dense, primary woodland of the Neolithic with large, tall, straight trees has few parallels today, and that changes in the Neolithic woodland could be dramatic, but not necessarily permanent. We are also urged not to separate the physical, functional qualities of those woodlands, and the timber gained from them from them, from the cosmological elements.

Visually the book utilizes photographs, plans and occasional reconstruction diagrams to illustrate the narrative, particularly in the discussion of archaeological case studies. No colour illustrations are included, which is a pity, although the lack of colour and limited reconstructions drawings (largely restricted to the concluding chapter) does allow the reader to create their own, perhaps more powerful, image of the Neolithic forest. The narrative can be a little repetitive in the later chapters, and the focus on monumentality at the expense of less visible aspects of the woodland (food, textiles, comfort, the debris of woodworking) may disappoint some readers. While the functionality of tree felling and clearance are discussed in detail, less focus is given to the functional requirements of those clearances in terms of cultivation and stock keeping, the impact of shade, and size of clearance needed. Particularly welcome was the attention given to the contribution of developer-funded excavations, as well as the need for field archaeologists to pay greater attention to natural features, too often disregarded as 'natural' and therefore of no archaeological interest. While it may not prove to be the definitive work, this publication is likely to be a welcome addition to the library of those interested in woodland and trees in the Neolithic and does go some way towards developing the integrated palaeoecological and social approaches presented in Fairbairn's 2000 Neolithic Studies Group publication (Fairbairn 2000).

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Ruth Pelling

Historic England

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