



Book Reviews

RITUAL IN EARLY BRONZE AGE GRAVE GOODS – AN EXAMINATION OF RITUAL AND DRESS EQUIPMENT FROM CHALCOLITHIC AND EARLY BRONZE AGE GRAVES IN ENGLAND BY A WOODWARD AND J HUNTER WITH D BUCHACH, S NEEDHAM AND A SHERIDAN

Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2015. 578 + pp, 240 illus, 155 tables, (includes CD), ISBN 978-1-7829-694-3 hb, £80. Digital edition ISBN 978-1-78297-69 5-0

This substantial volume presents a range of new data on artefacts which have been associated with the ‘Wessex Culture’ of the Early British Bronze Age and which have formed the basis of a developing sequence of hypotheses about its interpretation. It sets out to rectify ‘in part’ the lack of a comprehensive catalogue of these and presents the results of a research project funded by a Leverhume Trust grant to Birmingham University. The main aim of the project, as stated in the final paragraph of the Introductory Chapter 1, was ‘to investigate Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age grave goods in relation to their possible use as special dress accessories or as equipment employed within ritual activities and ceremonies’. The core of the volume are six chapters dealing with artefacts grouped by their perceived association within the burial context. The study is based on 968 artefacts, of which 81 were necklaces containing 4478 beads from 780 ‘well-furnished’ graves: the artefacts are grouped under 38 object categories, some with sub-categories, providing a very large amount of data (Tables 1.1, 2.3). Throughout there is emphasis on comparison of Beaker material and traditions of Period 1 and 2 with those of the mature Early Bronze Age (Periods 3 and 4).

‘Well-furnished graves’ were those that included one or more objects of gold, copper/copper alloy, amber, faience, jet or jet-like materials, bone, antler and stone. The areas concentrated upon were those with major antiquarian activity, Wessex (Dorset and Wiltshire), the Yorkshire Wolds and the Peak District, but key assemblages are from some other areas such as Norfolk. Pottery and flint were not studied although they were included on the data base. The authors explain carefully the constraints of different parts of their study and the terms of reference for each conclusion are clearly defined, set out in Chapter 2 ‘Methodology’. The onus of accuracy in using the data from this publication lies, as always, firmly with the user.

One of the great benefits this volume provides is colour photographs of most artefacts, the work of David Buchach. The illustrations have been made up from nearly 6000 individual images taken of the objects studied, presented against a black or a white background, and allowing direct visual comparison of items held in different museums or of different views of complex artefacts: these are supplemented in some cases by close-ups showing details such as tooling or wear marks. The main disadvantage here is the lack of drawn sections. Drawings are only provided, in addition to photographs, for the dagger/knives, for some of the beads, and for some complex artefacts such as the Bush Barrow gold sheet belt hook cover.

Chapter 3 covers items broadly associated with the belt area of the body – daggers, pommels and belt fittings. It includes Stuart Needham’s recent classification of daggers/knives, which is supported by a more extensive presentation on CD. This classification into seven Series, each

divided into two or more sub-groups, is bound to become a standard work of reference, although some detail of the chronology may be subject to refinement as further radiocarbon dates become available. Peter Bray contributes to a presentation on the chemical composition of these artefacts and provides more detailed discussion on CD. There then follows a section on pommels, with typo-chronology revised by Stuart Needham. Analysis of the material of which these were made surprisingly highlights whalebone, studied by Sonia O'Connor who contributed a section on this to the CD. The chapter concludes with sections on belt hooks and on belt and pulley rings. All sections, in this and the following chapters, follow the object groups through a regular sequence, typo-chronology, morphology, material, manufacture, completeness and damage, wear, and conclusions.

Chapter 4 covers items of equipment found in other areas of the body and usually considered as tools – sponge finger stones, perforated stones, awls, bone tweezers and another ten categories. Study of some, such as sponge finger stones, confirms the probability of their being leatherworking tools, while for bone and antler, spatula use as pressure flaking implements for flint working is now indicated. Awls are considered appropriate for tattooing/scarification, rather than for leatherworking, although the association with adult females is maintained. Bone points emerge as items of dress or body adornment or as hair pins rather than as tools, while bone tweezers are best interpreted as clips for hair or decorations. Supporting studies by Mark Maltby on animal bone and antler, and by Rob Ixer and others on PXR analysis of stone, are included on CD. Comment was contributed by the late Fiona Roe on aspects of the stonework, and she worked with the principal authors on bracers, which are the subject of a separate volume (Woodward and Hunter 2011).

Chapter 5 presents items of personal adornment in jet and jet-like materials, amber, bone and copper alloy. Alison Sheridan made a substantial input on the sections on studs, on V-perforated buttons and on button sets of jet and jet-like materials. A number of copper alloy earrings emerge as rather later in date than gold basket earrings, and like these, were probably tress rings rather than earrings. Twenty eight dress pins of different types and materials were studied, and the more elaborate of these pins show considerable evidence for curation. Other sections cover tusks and teeth, with indications that these were ornaments rather than tools, singleton beads and spacer plates, pendants and necklace fasteners.

Chapter 6 presents items of personal adornment in gold and the regalia from the Bush Barrow. The first section deals with gold items from seven separate barrows, including Clandon in Dorset and Little Cressingham in Norfolk. The second section covers 'The Regalia from... Bush Barrow.' Stuart Needham contributed to both these sections. A summary of the Bush Barrow material has already been published (Needham et al 2010), but the section provides a good deal more detail, while reproducing Needham's elegant reconstructions of the layout on the burial and of the mace, which will surely become the new classic images of the site. The chapter concludes with a section 'Discussion: Reappraising 'Wessex Goldwork'', by Stuart Needham. This provides a succinct summary of British and Irish goldwork in the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age periods and demonstrates usefully how minimal the surviving data may really be. It emphasises the British nature of the 'Wessex' goldwork and queries the now long-held presumption that this was all the result of a single craftsman. It suggests that the most distinctive 'Wessex' regional component in the British goldworking tradition lies in beads and pendants in which gold forms one of a range of composite materials. A further suggestion, really useful, is that the remainder of the 'Wessex' goldwork should be described as the *'sheet-gold cover tradition'* which avoids 'the potentially false connotations implicit in the 'Wessex' label'.

The two chapters on Necklaces, 7 and 8, to which Alison Sheridan makes a very great contribution, together cover 200 pages and would have merited publication as a separate volume.

A total of 81 necklaces have been studied and comprehensively illustrated, with a large number of detailed close-up photos. The necklaces are grouped: as of disc beads (12 examples), spacer plates of jet and jet-like materials (13), amber (4), as simple necklaces with components of variable shape (18), and composite necklaces (34). Where possible, each necklace is illustrated as it may have been strung, sometimes using data such as early illustrations to present alternatives or to show items now lost. The result is a series of stunning images which range from the simplicity of the Kempston, Bedfordshire, necklace of oolitic beads (Figure 8.1.8), to the complexity of that from Windle Nook, Derbyshire, with spacer plates of bone and other beads of jet (Figure 7.2.14). The studies are supported by tables of additional data on spacer plate necklaces of jet and jet-like materials and of amber which form a CD appendix. Work by Mary Davis and others on the sourcing also forms a CD appendix.

There are extensive discussion sections on each group of necklaces. From these grows a picture of the successive emergence of key groups, disc bead necklaces in the Chalcolithic (Period 1), jet space plate necklaces in Early Bronze Age Period 2 – linked to the currency of gold lunulae, and amber space plate necklaces in the mature Early Bronze Age Period 3. Composite necklaces have their principal currency in Period 4. These discussions bring forward a great deal of data outside the data set of necklaces studied, from areas outside the key regions, from lost examples, from new finds. (A list is provided of other 47 composite necklaces which did not form part of the study (Table 8.6.1)). There is special emphasis on the craft skills involved, with specialist jet workers in the Whitby area and amber workers in Wessex. The discussion sections are wide-ranging and link in well with those on other objects addressed in other chapters of the publication. For this reviewer it is difficult to overstate the value of the clear way in which the material on necklaces is presented, the impact of seeing so much of it so clearly in illustration, and the skill with which it is all worked into a developing picture of the Early Bronze Age.

Chapter 9, on chronology, presents concise summary dating for each category of object discussed in the preceding chapters. One of the aims of the project had been to compare objects found in the Beaker period with those found in the in Early Bronze Age, with the dividing date set at 2000 cal BC. To facilitate this aim, objects are grouped under three headings, ‘Chalcolithic’, ‘Early Bronze Age’, and ‘Both Beaker and Early Bronze Age’. (It is surely an error that the term ‘Chalcolithic’ was used for the overall Beaker period).

A key topic is addressed in Chapter 10 ‘Object Life Stories’ – fragmentation and the identification of heirlooms, the term used for objects with potentially long histories, probably at least a generation. All identified well-furnished Beaker graves in England are included, for the Early Bronze Age, all such graves in the three defined core areas with some additional key grave groups from elsewhere. A range of criteria for the identification of potential heirlooms are set out. As one small example, on the application of one of these criteria, variation in condition between similar objects, Dagger/Knife Series 1 has high potential within the Beaker period, while Series 2 has low potential. A second criterion, variation in condition within an assemblage, is extensively explored, including examination of individual beads. Data for both these criteria are set out in a series of tables. The third criterion, objects in child/adolescent burials with wear unlikely to have occurred during the individual’s lifespan, yielded only two with a high potential for heirloom presence. The fourth category, fragmentation, is again extensively explored, using clearly defined terminology. The whole analysis supplies a very large amount of detail, which it is impossible to summarise in this review. But in total the data demonstrates considerable potential for the deposition of heirlooms, starting in the Beaker period and continuing into the Early Bronze Age, with more data for Wessex than for the other regions in both periods. In particular pommels are nearly always more worn than their accompanying daggers.

The next Chapter, with David Buchach, explores 'Object Function', beginning with an examination of Morphology, Material and Manufacture and continuing with Usewear across the range of object groupings. 'Placement of Objects with the Body' is then examined, using an extended data base which is clearly defined. The placement of the various objects groups is examined, comparing Beaker and Early Bronze Ages examples, under Personal equipment, Personal adornment, Pottery, Bags and caches, and Cremations. Objects are next examined under associations by sex and age, which lead to a number of observations relating to gender starting with the greater number of well-furnished Beaker graves being male, the gender balance being more equal in the Early Bronze Age. The more frequently occurring objects are then studied by their association with each other, by regional grouping and by comparing Beaker with Early Bronze Age graves, both of which demonstrate a number of variations. There is a very great deal of data in this Chapter, supported by a total of 46 tables.

Regional Variation is addressed in the short Chapter 12, considering variations in occurrence of artefacts between the Beaker and the Early Bronze Age periods for the areas of the Yorkshire Wolds, the Peak District and Wessex, using the criteria set out in Chapter 2. The accompanying six maps and most of the tables in the Chapter include material from the grave groups studied from the 'Rest of Country' (Table 2.3). Some useful trends emerge in variation among the three regions in the proportions of Early Bronze Age burials.

A very brief concluding chapter summarises the results of the project, gathered through from the preceding chapters. The 'overwhelming result of the project' is described as the demonstration that most of the items buried in Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age graves were items of wear, personal decoration or equipment used in ritual acts and ceremonies. Certainly the items so described could have been used for this purpose, and certainly this presentation of the project justifies the title of the volume. This reviewer would agree that this *interpretation* of the work of the project is justified, but it is only interpretation and as such is liable to future modification. Surely the main lasting results are the very substantial stores of data on sourcing, manufacture, typology, function and usewear which will serve as an invaluable resource for all scholars of the periods now and in years to come.

References

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Henrietta Quinnell
Honorary Research Fellow
University of Exeter, UK

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