



Book Reviews

HAMBLEDON HILL, DORSET. EXCAVATION AND SURVEY OF A NEOLITHIC MONUMENT COMPLEX AND ITS SURROUNDING LANDSCAPE BY ROGER MERCER AND FRANCES HEALY

London: English Heritage Archaeological Reports. 2008. 816 pp, (2 vols). ISBN 978 1 905624 59 1 (£100)

Is there anyone working on British prehistory who is unfamiliar with Hambledon Hill? This was one of the great excavation projects of the 1970s and 80s and there can be few people who are not aware of some of the remarkable features of this Neolithic enclosure complex: its extensive earthworks; the great range of deposits found inside it; the extraordinary evidence for the treatment of the dead; the indications that the hilltop had been defended and attacked on more than one occasion. That is because the excavator and his colleagues have published important papers on the progress of research from its inception. At the same time, only now can we see how these studies go together in the final report on the project.

The Hambledon Hill project provides a commentary on the progress of Neolithic archaeology, from the period leading up to the first season of excavation in 1974 to the appearance of these two volumes. The earthworks of the main enclosure were largely removed by ploughing before Mercer's work began; there were small scale excavations on the standing earthworks, the results of which were never released; and an intact long barrow which formed a crucial part of the Neolithic complex was bulldozed without any record apart from a contour survey. Having allowed this to happen, the predecessors of English Heritage mounted an excavation project which ran for thirteen seasons. The stable door was opened after the horse had bolted, but, fortunately, the beast had left signs of its presence behind. A sequence of inept decisions made the fieldwork unnecessarily difficult, and it is remarkable that so much remained to be investigated and that the site still had an important story to tell. Much is due to the high quality of the excavation.

At the same time, the report deploys a number of methods of analysis which were unthinkable at the time when the work first took place: the statistical treatment of a large number of radiocarbon dates; isotopic study of human bones for evidence of diet; chemical analysis of the residues in Neolithic pottery; lithic refitting; sophisticated new techniques for studying human and animal bones. The result is that the monograph achieves a level of sophistication that was beyond the grasp of prehistorians even a decade ago. It is unfortunate that it is published by 'print-on-demand' as it sets a new standard for excavation reporting. English Heritage should publicise this achievement more effectively.

One problem with excavation monographs is that the amount of detail contained within them tends to run out of control. They may contain excellent technical papers, addressed to a variety of different specialists, but they often lose their overall direction. The best test of such reports is to ask how effectively the final discussion (if there is one) draws the information together. Mercer and Healy do this brilliantly. The closing chapter is one of the most coherent syntheses of a complex project that I have ever read. It is lucid, wide ranging and entirely convincing. All field archaeologists should read it, whatever their period interests.

This is not the only recent monograph on the prehistory of Cranborne Chase, and one of the most exciting features of this account is to see how the evidence from Hambledon Hill and its surroundings compares with the archaeology of the Dorset Cursus and the Allen Valley which were discussed in another monograph by Charles French and his colleague (French *et al.* 2007). The Neolithic landscape of southern Wessex has changed since I worked there in the early 1980s. We now know that the social geography of the region was transformed at the end of the fourth millennium BC as the causewayed enclosure complex at Hambledon was replaced by a new range of structures dominated by the Dorset Cursus. That sequence may have a wider application. What is needed now is research in two other areas which provide the sources of some of the artefacts introduced to Hambledon Hill: the lower ground to its west and north-west which still remains *terra incognita*; and the coast of the Solent Basin where too much fieldwork remains unpublished. The test of a good project is whether it suggests ideas for new research. The authors say as much in concluding their account of this work. They suggest an agenda for fresh work which cannot be ignored. In doing so they set a standard which will be hard to match. All in all, that is worth £100.

French, C., Lewis, H., Allen, M., Green, M., Scaife, R. & Gardiner, J. 2007. *Prehistoric landscape development in the upper Allen valley, Cranborne Chase, Dorset*. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research

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