



Book Reviews

LIFE IN THE LOOP: INVESTIGATION OF A PREHISTORIC AND ROMANO-BRITISH LANDSCAPE AT BIDDENHAM LOOP, BEDFORDSHIRE, BY MIKE LUKE

East Anglian Archaeology Report 125. Bedford: Albion Archaeology. 2008. xxiii+320 pages, 130 figures, 60 colour plates, 88 tables. ISBN 978 0 9556546 1 9. (£25.00)

The Biddenham Loop, some 200 ha of gravel terrace defined by a meander of the Great Ouse to the west of Bedford, abounds in cropmarks and ploughzone artefacts. It has figured in the prehistory of the east Midlands since Woodward's (1978) demonstration of the complementary distributions of cropmark ring ditches and of fieldwalked lithics, the latter predominantly of later Neolithic to Bronze Age date, interpreted as pointing to distinct settlement and ceremonial zones. Since then, the area has been seen as one of a number of monument complexes spaced along the middle and lower Great Ouse, for example by Malim (2000). This volume reports the results of an extensive programme of non-destructive survey and of excavation undertaken between 1991 and 1997 in advance of construction. Further discoveries, including the identification of a middle Bronze Age field system (Luke *et al.* 2009), have been made since the text was completed, so that it is in some ways an interim statement.

The volume succeeds in the difficult task of integrating the evidence from some 8 ha of open area excavation with that from more extensive fieldwalking, geophysical survey and aerial photograph analysis. The excellent graphics play an important role here. In the process, what had previously appeared to be a cursus monument is eradicated and a coherent landscape history is presented. Woodward's spatial separation of lithic scatters and monuments is confirmed over a wider area and a longer period; settlement hugs the riverside in the Mesolithic and early Neolithic, expanding into the interior of the Loop in the later Neolithic and early Bronze Age; pits are dug and filled from the later fourth millennium cal BC onwards; three groups of round barrows, with pits and burials beyond the mounds, develop around isolated Neolithic monuments and in turn influence the layout of later land boundaries; two east-west pit alignments, one of them close to the single late second/early first millennium cal BC settlement focus, mark a reorientation of the landscape; this is succeeded by scattered farmsteads in the north of the Loop; following a Late Iron Age settlement shift, farmsteads are established over the whole area by the first century AD, with associated cemeteries and kilns; these farmsteads continue through the Roman period.

The story is a good one, but it could have been better told. The fieldwork is described in competent, clear period chapters, preceded by a synthesis. This would have worked splendidly had the synthesis been synthetic. Instead it is a plodding summary of the descriptive chapters which follow, with references to an oddly assorted ragbag of publications. Nothing is advanced, for example, by quoting a definition of 'ring ditch' from the 1960s. There is a dearth of original thought and the extent to which developments in the Loop mirror or diverge from regional and wider trends and why is considered unevenly. The author seems more at home in the Iron Age than in earlier periods.

There was a lost opportunity to tell a shorter, freer, punchier story, situating the archaeology more explicitly in the context of the Great Ouse valley, an artery of communication and a focus of settlement and ceremony in which communities must have been interconnected. A few sets of comparative plans and references to other sites do not do the job. Mileage could have been extracted from, for example, the extent to which relatively small and inconspicuous Neolithic monuments tend to be lost among ring ditches in the aerial photographic record; the shifting character and significance of pit deposits from the later fourth millennium cal BC (cf Garrow 2007) into the first; the interpretation of a second millennium cal BC animal burial — one of a growing number (cf. Barrett *et al.* 1991, 134–136; Pryor 1998, 101–2; Gdaniec *et al.* 2007, 35–38), as well as of first millennium animal bone deposits; above all, more could have been made of the first century AD cemeteries.

The reader is left wondering, too, why certain interpretative decisions were made, for example:

Why does a predominantly north-easterly direction of fall in treethrow holes reflect human agency rather than prevailing south-westerly winds?

Why are putative territories taken to be circular, a probability unendorsed by history, ethnography or topography?

Might high gravel densities in parts of the topsoil reflect former ridge and furrow cultivation (of which there is evidence) as well as or instead of the former presence of prehistoric earthworks?

Why are elongated quadrangular and ovoid Neolithic enclosures taken to be funerary when many excavated examples, including the one in this volume, yield no evidence for such a function?

The volume makes a major contribution to the archaeology of the valley and the archaeology of the region. The user, is, however, left to articulate its contents with both.

References

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Frances Healy
Cardiff University

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