



## Book Reviews

### **FEASTING AND SOCIAL COMPLEXITY IN LATER IRON AGE EAST ANGLIA, BY SARAH RALPH**

*Oxford, Archaeopress. BAR (British Series) 451. 2007. 172 pages, 38 figs, 49 tables. ISBN 978-1-4073-0163-1. (£42)*

As with many BARs this is the publication of an altered version of Sarah Ralph's PhD carried out between 2002 and 2006 at Cambridge University. The aim of this study is to investigate the social changes that take place in the later Iron Age of East Anglia. The author attempts this by focusing on commensal activities and the role it may have played. It is divided into seven chapters with a summarising list of sites and data presented in the appendix as well as a number of colour distribution maps.

The short introductory chapter sets out the focus of the volume and some of the key questions it aims to consider. This is followed by a useful summary of theoretical perspectives regarding feasting. The archaeological examples in this chapter are from the Mediterranean, covering classical feasting and dining, in an attempt to highlight the cultural variability. The rest of this chapter concentrates on anthropological work, especially that of Michael Dietler and Brian Hayden. The third chapter starts with a background summary to the Iron Age of East Anglia, discussing the landscape, settlement evidence, tribal groups, burial and ritual and material culture. In the material culture section, pottery, coinage and metal work are discussed as 'pottery is a primary means of addressing feasting' (p 26) and 'consumption may not be restricted to food and drink' (p 29). However, there is no discussion of the agriculture of the region, even though studies such as Hambleton (1999) have made some of the information readily accessible. This is then followed by a round-up of current literature and approaches to feasting in the Iron Age and early Roman periods of western and central Europe and Britain.

Chapter four consist of the study's methodology. In this chapter, the archaeological criteria of feasts are laid out, altered from Hayden (2001). These consist of food, vessels (preparation and serving), 'special' locations, ritualised items of etiquette, pictorial and written records and monuments. The archaeological data was then analysed for these criteria, considering the size, location and nature of each deposit. Although possible biases are discussed, some aspects of the methodology remain unclear. For example the 'overall amount of faunal remains recovered from a site determined whether or not the site would be excluded' (p 47) from the study. However, how large the sample needs to be and the reasons for this cut off are not discussed. Also, evidence of butchery and burning were considered in order to exclude assemblages that could be indicative of sacrifice, but animal sacrifice and feasting may take place as part of the same event.

The fifth chapter analyses the data gathered in the subsections already defined. It begins with a summary of the sites where feasting has been identified using the authors criteria, before moving on to discuss different aspects of the evidence such as pottery, pig remains, dyke systems and hoards in relation to feasting. This is followed by a general summary discussing the geographical distribution of the sites. Although some detail is given it is often unclear what the evidence for feasting is from some sites. Chapter six, which covers the detailed case studies is, in parts, more convincing. The case studies are discussed by feasting type, which include, work-party, alliance building, funerary and diacritical feasts. The types of feasting are based on those discussed by Dietler and Hayden (2001). It is suggested that work-party feasts would have taken place at Fison Way, Thetford, Norfolk. This is based on the site being a consumer rather than producer site, the undertaking of a series of earthwork redevelopments and its similarity to Viereckschanze. Unfortunately bone does not survive on the site and the main evidence appears to come from the proportion of fine to course ware, following on from Murray's (1995) work. It is suggested that the work-party feasts would provided the incentive for the construction and alterations to the earthworks. At Fison Way there is no particular striking deposit that suggests feasting, however it is argued that it is the assemblage as a whole that indicates the activity. In comparison, many of the interpretations of alliance building and diacritical feasts are based on the deposits of particular artefacts, such as the strainer bowls at Ardleigh, Essex or the animal remains from an individual pit as at Baldock, Hertfordshire. The interpretation of funerary feasts mainly discusses what many may consider as food and drink offerings placed with the diseased, rather than feasting events undertaken by the living during ceremonies.

The final chapter draws the theme of feasting together with life cycles and discusses at which points feasts may have taken place. The author goes on to suggest that although feasting has been identified on 76 sites, this is out of several hundred Iron Age sites in the region indicating that is was a very selective activity. It is also concluded that the data may have highlighted a variety of feasting activities, but it is not possible to distinguish single functions as each event may have a multiple of meanings (p 108).

The book is mostly well written with a small number of typos and as with most PhDs turned BARs it is perhaps best suited to the specialist reader. Overall the author has struggled with a weighty and complex topic. The main crux of

the volume is dependent upon the identification of feasting in the archaeological record, which is a problematic issue. Some arguments put forward are more convincing than others. The sites identified as having diacritical feasts are the most successful because this type of feast involves the use of different cuisine and style of consumption. It is more convincing that a single deposit at Baldock producing 4400 lbs of meat is the result of a feasting event, compared to using the percentage of overall pottery fabrics from a site. It is a shame that more work was not carried out on 'normal' consumption as a baseline. Perhaps the reason we struggle with the identification of 'feasting' is that we do not yet understand how 'normal' consumption took place. Ralph also makes the point that feasting events can be variable in scale and meaning. The identification of some sites where Ralph suspects feasting has taken place perhaps leads us to Parker Pearson's (2003) comment that most animal bone on prehistoric sites may be the result of feasting. Although the results may be variable, Ralph's work has a very important aspect in that it attempts to move beyond the material culture to the 'above ground' events that created it and, importantly, the meanings behind them. The study of British rock art is flourishing as never before, and these two books are both outstanding contributions to the field, although markedly different in content and approach.

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