



## Book Reviews

### THE DARTMOOR REAVES: INVESTIGATING PREHISTORIC LAND DIVISIONS, BY ANDREW FLEMING

Oxford, Windgather Press, 2007. 233pp. 48 B7W and col. plates, 48 maps & dwgs (pb). ISBN 978-1-905119-15-8 (£20.00)

The publication of a second edition of *The Dartmoor Reaves* in 2007 has attracted considerable interest from readers with an interest in archaeologies of land division. The book updates an account of enclosure that has been widely represented in investigations of agricultural landscapes and their appearance in northwestern Europe during later prehistory. Consequently, its re-presentation as a revised edition has important implications for accounts of later prehistoric development and the arrival of early agriculture.

Originally published in 1998, *The Dartmoor Reaves* described Andrew Fleming's investigation and interpretation of the coaxial field-systems, or reaves, that survive across Dartmoor in southwest England (Fleming 1988). The explanation for the appearance of these extensive grids of enclosure rested on its description of the surveys and excavations that Fleming had conducted on the Moor during the 1970s and 80s (1978; 1983). It described how he had mapped the Reaves as a single pattern of enclosure that radiated out across the margins of the Moor. Fleming concluded that the uniformity and interdependence of this pattern demonstrated that it materialised a single, planned horizon of enclosure dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, on account of the close relationships observed between Dartmoor's reaves and its prehistoric monuments and settlements. Such chronology was corroborated by the uncalibrated, contemporaneous Middle Bronze Age radiocarbon dates that had been excavated from coaxial field systems at the separate sites of Holne and Shaugh Moor (Smith *et al.* 1981). Fleming also considered that the process of enclosure that it had identified on Dartmoor could be applied as a universal, cross-cultural explanation for the appearance of coaxial field-systems in other regions and periods.

*The Dartmoor Reaves* (1988) was written as a chronicle of discovery that was both intensely personal and widely accessible. The narrative style and pioneering approach to investigating the organisation of agricultural landscapes led to it being hailed as a benchmark in literature on landscape archaeology. Furthermore, its view that coaxial field systems were the product of a single, universally shared scheme for enclosure has been widely represented in work on agricultural landscapes and in accounts of their appearance in Bronze Age Britain.

Tensions have, however, emerged between the book's enduring influence and problems that have come to light with its explanation for enclosure. In the 20 years since the original was published critical developments have taken place to our knowledge of the formation of coaxial systems in Britain, and have been amplified by a wealth of new prehistoric and historic discoveries. Thus, while *The Dartmoor Reaves* is still very important to current perspectives on land division, it has also begun to appear outdated. The publication of a second modified edition in 2007 has been welcomed for its promise to address these issues by clarifying the work's relationship to current perspectives on agricultural landscapes. In fact, the second edition is explicitly presented as a volume that answers recent perspectives, while preserving the 'original narrative of discovery'. It sets out to achieve this with eight modified chapters, two completely new chapters and colour or enhanced versions of the original illustrations.

A cursory read through the revised edition most certainly suggests that it has been successful in meeting its aims. Chapters One to Four re-present the original narrative of the Reaves re-discovery as prehistoric boundaries and mapping as a single horizon of Bronze Age land-division. Chapters Five to Six reissue the first edition's description of the case studies that substantiated the preliminary investigations. They describe Fleming's more detailed surveys of the Venford field system and his experiences of excavating an area of it at Holne Moor. Although these chapters are slightly modified by annotations, the structure and content of their original text remains largely intact. The same can be said of Chapter Seven, which reissues the 1988 account of how its explanation for enclosure fits into the broader prehistoric development of Dartmoor. Similar treatment is extended to Chapter Eight, which reiterates the original explanation of how enclosure on the Moor can explain the appearance of other coaxial field systems in Britain and Ireland.

The book then turns to its two completely new chapters, which focus more fully on modifying the original work and reconciling it to new perspectives on coaxial landscapes. Chapter Nine begins by reviewing the current evidence for enclosure. Readers are advised of the important findings that have been produced from recent research on Dartmoor from Butler's extensive surveys and the investigations that Brück *et al.* have conducted at Shovel Down (Butler 1991-1997; Brück *et al.* 2003). However, little attention is paid to the content or implications of recent work from Dartmoor. The chapter instead focuses on reviewing new discoveries in the patterns of coaxial enclosure that have been found 'off the Moor' and how they reinforce the original account of enclosure. This section of the book also replies to the

post-processualist perspectives that have begged for revision to the interpretations described in the original work. Chapter Ten characterises such perspectives as a criticism of explanations that supplant the particular and meaningful ways that communities could have understood coaxial enclosure with modern, economically rationalist perspectives. It then replies to such challenge by considering the alternative cosmological terms in which communities may have considered the common scheme of enclosure.

The book finally culminates with an evaluation of how the original work can be reconciled to current perspectives on coaxial landscapes. It concludes that the methods and interpretations that were described in the 1988 edition are generally upheld by recent perspectives. The original contention that coaxial landscapes can be explained as the product of a general, cross-cultural template for land division is underlined (Fleming 2007, 188-189). The chronological envelope for enclosure is lengthened, however, the layout of coaxial fields continues to be considered as a commonly held, wholesale plan that was enacted over a relatively short horizon of time. The second edition is satisfied that recent discoveries in our knowledge of the prehistoric and historic material reinforce this view. Furthermore, it concludes that the post-processual challenge can be addressed simply by overlaying 'subjective' interpretations over the original explanation. The book's endorsement of the original narrative is also evident in its choice of illustrations. The maps, drawings and plates included comprise colour or enhanced versions of the original illustrations and are dominated by depictions of widespread enclosures or their individual boundary components

Thus a cursory read of the second edition may suggest that, substantively, the original account is supported by current perspectives on coaxial landscapes. However, this is a position that might not be accepted by readers with some knowledge of current perspectives of coaxial landscapes. For, while the book preserves the original narrative of discovery, it does not adequately address the problems that have limited its influence in current archaeologies of land division.

Even though the second edition addresses the developments in archaeological perspectives that question the original, its response to these challenges is all too often incomplete. For instance, the book's account of the current evidence for enclosure is inadequate. The second edition refrains from describing the recent evidence from Dartmoor, when a review of this material reveals that its cultural sequence no longer supports the explanation for enclosure that it presents. This is because the radiocarbon chronologies that are claimed to support the book's view can no longer be considered to uphold it. Re-examination of the sequences from the field-system excavated at Shaugh Moor has revealed a chronology for enclosure that is quite different to that presented in *The Dartmoor Reaves*. Johnston has pointed out that the assays recovered from this excavation do not reference the establishment of coaxial boundaries (Johnston 2005; cf. Smith *et al.* 1981). He has demonstrated that these values, which he also calibrated, reference the sequence of land use that was uncovered beneath the boundaries' formation. Consequently, the evidence for chronology and process of land-division is altogether more complex than the simultaneous event of enclosure described in *The Dartmoor Reaves*.

This reviewer's own research into the evidence from Shaugh and Holne Moor has revealed that the radiocarbon values produced from these excavations do not date a Bronze Age horizon of enclosure. The values produced from the alignments excavated at Shaugh Moor were recovered from scenarios that are now considered too insecure to date cultural horizons (Barclay & Halpin 1999). Each of the samples that have been thought to date processes of enclosure derives from peat-based, water-logged or stock-trampled contexts that are separate from the boundaries and preclude us from determining the events dated by the values returned. Consequently these assays cannot be used to date the establishment of coaxial formations either on Shaugh Moor or further afield. Problems are also evident with the dating evidence from Holne Moor. The contextual information available for the single radiocarbon value recovered from a reave at this site is contradictory, for the reports available disagree on the horizon from which the date was sampled (Maguire *et al.* 1981; Burleigh *et al.* 1983; Fleming 1983). This is problematic given that a full archaeological report on Holne Moor is yet to be made available. It prevents us from establishing the activity referenced by the date in question. Moreover, it also reinforces the position that contemporary perspectives on the evidence from Dartmoor do not support the ideas presented in the second edition. Contemporary perspectives ask us to disregard the radiocarbon dates available from Shaugh and Holne Moor, which substantially undermines the book's claim that a single horizon of enclosure is materialised in Dartmoor's surface based formations. This lessening of support for the original explanation is also reinforced by other recent research from the Moor, which describes the long and locally rooted processes of enclosure that are also evidenced in sequences of reave formation (cf. Butler 1991-1997; Gibson 1992; Johnston 2005).

Similar problems are evident in the book's treatment of other themes in current perspectives on coaxial landscapes. For instance, its reply to the challenges that have been mounted by post-processual perspectives is limited. This is because the book reduces post-processualism to a criticism of reconstructions that are cast in contemporarily situated, economically rationalist terms. Doing so allows it to answer such challenge by simply overlaying more intimate and perspective cosmologies over its universalised mechanisms of enclosure. Yet this ignores post-processualism's more fundamental criticism of how such explanations overlook the influences that contextually specific conditions could have exerted on emergent processes of cultural development. Consequently, the book does not address the more pertinent argument that processes of coaxial enclosure could have unfolded in ways that were historically contingent rather than as universally conceptualised and enacted schemes. This is disappointing, particularly in light of the current evidence for locally rooted formation in the coaxial sequence from Dartmoor.

In this way, the second edition's presentation of such limited responses to current perspectives on coaxial landscapes does not demonstrate how they can be reconciled to the original account. It is true to say that the book's modifications update the narrative and bring it closer to contemporary discourse. Its revisions, however, do not truly

address the substantive developments in evidence and interpretation that challenge the original. The modifications that the edition makes are too few and too incomplete compared to its nearly wholesale re-presentation of the original work. Nonetheless, these limitations should not dissuade readers from acquiring the second edition. The changes that it makes only improve a work that can still be acclaimed for its valuable contribution to our understanding of ancient field systems. Also, the book's endeavour to preserve the original while acknowledging current perspectives will be useful for readers getting to grips with the historiography of this subject. This is a volume that certainly qualifies for essential reading in literature on prehistoric agriculture. More informed readers may be disappointed that the second edition does not truly clarify how the work is related to current perspectives on coaxial landscapes, but there is always the possibility that this issue may be addressed in future work by its author.

### **References**

- Burleigh, R., Macandrews, K., Ambers J. & Kinnes, I. 1981. British Museum Radiocarbon Measurement XII. *Radiocarbon* 23, 14-23
- Brück, J., Johnston, R., & Wickstead H. 2003. Excavations of Bronze Age coaxial field systems on Shovel Down, Dartmoor. *PAST* 45, 10-12
- Butler, J. 1991-1997. *The Dartmoor Atlas of Antiquities: Volumes 1-5*. Exeter: Devon Books
- Fleming, A. 1978. The Prehistoric Landscape of Dartmoor, Part 1: South Dartmoor. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 44, 97-123.
- Fleming, A. 1983. The Prehistoric Landscape of Dartmoor, Part 2: North and east Dartmoor. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 49, 195-241
- Fleming, A. 1988. *The Dartmoor Reaves: Investigating prehistoric land divisions*. London: Batsford
- Gibson, A. 1992. Excavation of an Iron Age settlement at Gold Park, Dartmoor. *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society*, 50, 19-46
- Johnston, R. 2005. Pattern without a Plan. Rethinking the Bronze Age Coaxial Field Systems on Dartmoor, Southwest England. *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 24, 1-21
- Maguire, D.N., Ralph, N. & Fleming, A. 1983. Early land use on Dartmoor: palaeobotanical and pedological investigations on Holne Moor. In M. Jones (ed.) *Integrating the Subsistence Economy*. Oxford: BAR Int. Ser. S181, 57-105
- Smith, K., Coppen, J., Wainwright, G.J. & Beckett, S. 1981. The Shaugh Moor Project: Third report: Settlement and environmental investigations. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 47, 205-73

Lorraine Seymour  
University of Sheffield

Review submitted: December 2009

*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor*