



Book Reviews

PEOPLE OF THE LONG BARROWS; LIFE AND DEATH AND BURIAL IN THE EARLIER NEOLITHIC, BY MARTIN SMITH & MEGAN BRICKLEY

Stroud, The History Press 2009. 192pp, 60 b&w figs, 10 colour, 16 tables. (pb) ISBN 978 0 7524 4733 9 (£18.99)

My, we certainly need this. As the Preface makes clear, for students of prehistory it is the first 'dedicated publication on human remains from Earlier Neolithic Britain'. The book is the long awaited and very welcome result of extensive research on the part of the two individuals involved and the joint authorship ensures that it is well-focussed, authoritative, and comprehensive in scope and ensures that few if any aspects are overlooked.

Aware of the problems of writing for different audiences, the authors acknowledge the potential difficulties and set out their preferred solution. They opt for 'a holistic 'biocultural' approach in combining scientific data obtained from skeletal analysis with insights derived from social theory, whilst also incorporating information from other aspects of the archaeological record'. Thus there is a series of justifications on the use of ethnography and terminology, the use of end notes to labour points in greater detail and of shaded boxes to highlight and lift portions of the text and emphasise certain points. Despite this, the design is at times a little thesis-like and in places, for example, on the determination of sex, it reads like a text book. But this is no bad thing and consequently it succeeds as a volume aimed at the Neolithic specialist and archaeological student rather than wider readership for which the History Press is renowned.

The material derives from a study of surviving human bone from a number of excavated long barrows, some of it from more recent investigations, but inevitably supplemented by remains from antiquarian encounters. The volume features a well-researched account of the contribution of early antiquarians. Eminently necessary, as their work, after some 200 years in the case of William Cunnington, still provides much of the primary evidence. It describes past endeavours - principally the influence of the work of Cunnington and his colleagues when excavating long barrows on Salisbury Plain - but also Thomas Bateman and others. Notable among them is John Thurnam, who might be described as the first 'specialist', someone who understood anatomy and who, unlike his predecessors, excavated barrows principally in search of skeletal material. His careful measurement of skulls led to the thesis that different racial types were responsible for constructing long and round barrows respectively. Later, George Rolleston assisted both William Greenwell and Lane Fox (Pitt Rivers) in providing specialist comment on skeletal material and moved the subject into an arena where greater objectivity in archaeological recovery was necessary. The authors discuss the unfortunate trend during the first half of the 20th^h century to equate mental capacity and skull form; something politically manipulated and in the post-war period dismissed as being associated with ideas of racial supremacy and as being scientifically incorrect. Piggott later pointed out that Thurnam's basic observation stands and while acknowledging this, the authors evidently felt it safer not to pursue the matter in any detail.

Since the sample used for analysis derives from monuments generally thought to be for burial, the process of transforming the dead figures large and indeed, is given a whole chapter. The various methods of disposing of corpses is outlined, excarnation by exposure, excarnation by prior burial, cultural modification of bone, progressive disarticulation, and cremation with evidence from both the archaeological record and ethno-historical examples brought to bear. The amount of cremated bone excavated from Stonehenge by Colonel Hawley in the 1920s has recently been brought to wider attention (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2009) and it is interesting to note just how much such cremated Neolithic material stacks up when catalogued. The authors list cremated bone from Hazleton North and West Kennet, Ascott under Wychwood, Luckington, Din Dryfol, Diffryn Ardudwy, Penywyrlod, five cairns in the Highlands, plus a number of Caithness tombs etc. From the Chestnuts chambered tomb in Kent alone, cremated bone from at least nine individuals was recovered. Given that chances of both survival and recovery of such material is reduced when compared to unburnt material it could be that such burials are vastly under-represented in the archaeological record. Indeed, it may even be the case that cremation was the normal burial rite and that the people whose bones are found in long barrows were not typical of the general population and were specially selected. Why some bone was so chosen remains an important question requiring attention and despite informed suggestions, preference by age, wisdom, wealth, disease, violence, fame or status, there are at present no clear indications of the criteria by which individuals were chosen. The evidence for arranging and rearranging bodies in tombs is discussed and interesting ethnographic accounts brought to bear to illustrate possibilities; for example, the Huron Feast of the Dead and the nature of Merina communal burial in Madagascar. An emphasis on human bone present in shell middens serves to highlight the uncertain nature of middens themselves and the western interpretation of 'refuse', 'rubbish', or 'trash' [a modern concept] might usefully be reconsidered. Despite the recent trend to investigate the regional aspects of the Neolithic no such variation is apparent in the evidence from tombs. Instead there is an 'apparent lack of regional variation ...' and a 'greater variation between [burials in] monuments in the same area than

between regions ...' and it is a salutary reminder of the importance of not losing sight of the common thread. Ultimately, the process of deposition, removal, circulation and re-deposition points to an important relationship with the living and it emphasises that the bones are more than mere artefacts but 'socially charged' and represent evidence of the presence of past generations, especially when tied in to a place monumentalised by construction. In such cases the bones might be used to legitimise tenure.

The book is about the people rather than their death. Age, sex, family relationships are all considered. Although the nature of the association remains uncertain, the skeletal remains from long barrows often appear to share certain characteristics and there is some indication of a close genetic relationship. It's not clear whether the authors consider the material from Lanhill to represent a family group as originally suggested by Cave (in Keiller & Piggott 1938) or not and there is due caution throughout – but trends are indicated. While population estimates for Neolithic Britain have increased over the years, from 10-40,000 suggested in 1972 to 100,000 more recently for England and Wales (Brothwell 1972; Pryor 2003), the authors maintain a respectable caution, although it must be said that it would be very useful to have something fresh to go on. They do indicate that a pastoral economy would support a population of one person per 2ha of grazed land and the implications of this are considerable. Population expansion is seen as the result of the introduction of farming rather than invasion and it is pointed out that migrations account for 30% of modern DNA, effectively no more than 10-30% of the gene pool having arrived in the Neolithic. Two routes are highlighted, one from Scandinavia the other from along the Atlantic coast. Close and regular contact with animals coupled with fixed housing is likely to have led to an increase in infectious diseases and respiratory conditions.

Recent isotope analysis of teeth, for example on the skeletons at Monkton up Wimborne (French *et al.* 2007) allow useful debate about mobility and of course violence, with which we are now familiar from other recent work (Schulting 2000) is discussed along with the evidence for projectile wounds and skull smashing. Whether the individuals who died in violent circumstances might have been treated differently to the norm and given separate burial almost takes us back to the 19th century suggestions of 'battle barrows'. Stable isotope values from several sites 'indicate substantial quantities of animal protein in the diet. The data support suggestions of each monument being used by a 'specific social group with shared lifeways and subsistence methods'. Values are plotted for bones from 12 monuments. Almost all of these are, however, upland sites from Salisbury Plain and the Cotswolds, areas renowned for 'cow down' and 'sheep down' type place names used until the later 20th century for short haul transhumance, renowned for supporting stock. It is noted that the 'range of values obtained from the causewayed enclosure at Hambledon Hill was much more diverse than those derived from most funerary monuments'. Fussell's Lodge and Bolesbarrow have lower isotope values which are considered therefore to indicate 'mixed subsistence regime amongst some groups'. The consequences of settled agriculture on health are something often overlooked. The implication is that in areas of rich natural resources, coastal zones, estuaries and river valleys, but for much of the country, those areas best suited to early agriculture population levels may have been thinner. There could have been greater population levels prior to the adoption of agriculture. However, in such areas as Britain, concentration of naturally available resources would probably have precluded denser population levels prior to plant/or animal domestication. Plant domestication tends to foster decreased mobility and this would have had associated consequences for health. Use of pottery too encouraged infections. Medical treatment and congenital conditions are considered along with the implications of social care. It is astonishing that 'given the small size of the overall sample ... the occurrence of so many individuals with disabling conditions ... is considerably higher than might be expected by chance.'

The volume comprehensively synthesises past work and admirably brings things bang up to date. It is well illustrated throughout and there are useful appendices listing excavated long mounds that have produced human material and arrowheads found in association with earlier Neolithic burials. It concludes with some indications of future directions. In particular, recent advances in genetics need to fully feed through into archaeology and the future holds much promise in this field. Future study of bones from contexts other than long barrows should indicate the extent to which the burials are representative; causewayed enclosures in particular, have provided a certain amount of material, although what is really required is contrast with material in different parts of the landscape.

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