



Book Reviews

MONUMENT, MEMORY AND MYTH; USE AND RE-USE OF THREE BRONZE AGE ROUND BARROWS AT COSSINGTON, LEICESTERSHIRE, BY JOHN THOMAS

Leicester: University of Leicester Archaeological Services; Leicester Archaeology Monograph 14. 2008. English, French and German summaries 144pp + xvi, 91 b/w figs, 19 colour plates, 21 tables. ISBN 0 9538914 7 X (£17.50)

This book provides a belated though very welcome description of round barrow excavations undertaken near Cossington, Leicestershire, in 1976 (Barrows 1 and 2) and 2001 (Barrow 3). These sites are significant regionally and nationally in four main respects. First, two of the Early Bronze Age burials warrant wide attention because of their unusual character and important artefact assemblages (the child burial with a complex set of grave goods including a Food Vessel from Barrow 2, and an inhumation with a composite necklace including a faience bead from Barrow 3). Second, the exceptionally well-dated cremation cemetery around the south-east side of Barrow 1 offers a rare opportunity for exploring the nature of funerary practices at the very end of the Early Bronze Age. Third, these sites make a notable contribution to our otherwise limited knowledge of the Early Bronze Age in the Soar/Wreake river system and in the Midlands more generally. Fourth, all three of the monuments had complex if very different histories of elaboration and reuse, providing insights into the ways in which ancient structures served as media for acts of memorisation and for mythic and historical constructions of the 'past' in the cultural repertoires of past societies. This latter theme, in particular, is developed by the lead author in the final part of the volume and, indeed, provides the book with its title.

These four facets are dealt with very unevenly. For example, Alison Sheridan's excellent comparative discussion of the composite necklace from Barrow 3 and its parallels at a national scale (pp80-8), contrasts with the relatively cursory treatment of the child grave with a fine Food Vessel Vase and two unusual miniature vessels from Barrow 2. In particular, the significance of this burial in relation to the wider range of funerary practices involving child remains in the period 2100-1800 BC, especially the great rarity of burials with large artefact assemblages (cf. Garwood 2007b), receives very little attention. Similarly, the wider importance of the Barrow 1 cremation cemetery is not discussed in any detail, even though this is the *only* published late Early Bronze Age (c. 1700-1500 BC) cemetery of this kind in England and Wales dated by a series of high-value radiocarbon determinations (seven dates; all on cremated human bone). These provide a reliable basis for dating the majority of burial events to the 17th/early 16th centuries BC. Perhaps the most surprising *lacuna* in the volume, however, is the limited consideration of the Cossington sites in their regional and landscape contexts, especially in the light of recent syntheses of Early Bronze Age evidence in both the East and West Midlands (Clay 2006; Garwood 2007a).

The strongest interpretative aspect of the volume is certainly the emphasis on memory and myth in the use and re-use of the monuments. The three round barrow sites at Cossington between them exhibit a very wide range of practices that referenced the past: the location of round barrows at places that were already significant in the cultural landscape (Barrow 3, in an area of earlier pit groups), acts of architectural elaboration or reconstruction (e.g. the outer ditches at Barrows 1 and 2), monument renewal (ditch recuts at Barrow 2), repeated depositional acts within ditches (in the inner ditch of Barrow 1), series of secondary funerary events, in some cases centuries or even millennia after final construction episodes (e.g. the cremation cemetery at Barrow 1, and the Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon burials at Barrow 3), and the choice of ancient mounds as foci for later settlement and as boundary markers (during the Iron Age and medieval periods). The discussion of these practices and their cultural significance, although brief, draws on interpretative approaches that have come to the fore in European archaeology recently, especially those concerned with historical and mythological representations in the past (eg, Bradley 2002; Williams 2003; 2006). Even though this approach privileges one reading of the Cossington evidence over many other potential but unrealised interpretations, it is refreshing to see an attempt to make sense of site evidence with reference to current interpretative discourses, rather than just the presentation of a material account accompanied by the kinds of mundane interpretation that seem to be the usual outcome of developer-funded round barrow excavations. If anything, the themes that Thomas highlights at the end could have been explored more fully and more critically throughout the book, with more overt treatment in the individual site discussion sections.

The site descriptions and specialist reports are certainly thorough and accessible, and the volume benefits from having a clear contents list, numerous helpful tables and a useful index, which make text navigation and information extraction straightforward. In presentational terms, the book is well-formatted and attractive to read, although some more stringent copy editing would have rectified occasional errors: for example, there is conflicting contextual information given for the earliest radiocarbon date from Barrow 1, noted as Feature 4 in the text (p17) but Feature 1 in Table 2 (p31). There are some welcome colour plates, with crisp images of the most important artefact finds and several appealing reconstruction images which liven up the volume (although such characterizations, as ever, are as

arguable interpretively as they are evocative visually). The grey-scale photographs and drawings are also mostly of a high standard, except for some of the plans and sections which are rather heavy-lined and reproduced at a variety of scales; in particular, there was clearly a case for re-drawing the original plans of features recorded at Barrows 1 and 2 (eg, figs 27, 29, 30).

Overall, this book makes a useful if uneven contribution to the study of Early Bronze Age funerary monuments and their after-lives in Britain. There is no question that several aspects are significant at a national scale, although these were not always recognised and certainly not developed fully in the discussion. The book is also clearly of considerable interest in terms of our knowledge of the Bronze Age in the English Midlands, despite the fact that the regional dimension is not explored at length. On reflection, it may seem that the book falls uneasily between two stools: the exigencies of producing a standard excavation report that conforms with the expectations and conventions of current field archaeology and publication practice, while at the same time endeavouring to thread a single strong interpretative theme through the text in such a way that 'memory and myth' becomes a kind of metanarrative that pervades the entire volume. This may or may not be an admirable intention, but the result is patchy and not wholly successful in application. Yet, this reviewer would much rather read an excavation report which tries to address the site evidence in a compelling and challenging manner, as this book does, rather than one that just reproduces stereotypical and derivative 'interpretations'. This monograph may be of interest primarily to specialists in Early Bronze Age funerary archaeology, and to field and curatorial archaeologists working in the Midlands, but it has wider resonance interpretatively and raises anew some difficult questions about what we really want from our excavation reports.

References

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Review submitted: January 2010

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