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Book Reviews



A LATE IRON AGE FARMSTEAD IN THE OUTER HEBRIDES: EXCAVATIONS AT MOUND 1, BORNISH, SOUTH UIST. Edited by Niall Sharples. Pp. xvii and 419, Illus 213. Oxbow Books, 2012. Price: £35.00. ISBN 978 184217 469 2.

This is a fine, well-crafted volume containing another rich vein of new data on the Hebridean settlement record. How times have changed! Only a few decades ago, there were no modern excavation reports and no radiocarbon chronology, and with the pace of excavations elsewhere, it seemed the Western Isles might be left behind. But since then, a series of university based projects from Lewis down to the southern isles, and salvage work in the face of coastal erosion, have provided one of the best-documented settlement records in Scotland.

The work at Bornais forms part of the programme by Sheffield and Cardiff universities on South Uist. In this case, it targeted a settlement lying on the boundary between the Middle and Late Iron Age which, in terms of the chronology adopted by the volume, lies about AD 400. The introduction contains a useful summary of the history of work in the Hebrides and sets out this chronological framework, which as the author says, is sufficiently idiosyncratic to confuse readers who have not been inducted into the long Iron Age of the Western and Northern Isles. The chapters thereafter — ‘The Late Iron Age Settlement’, ‘Norse Reoccupation’, ‘Comparative Analysis of the Site Assemblage’, ‘Chronology’, ‘Resource Exploitation’, ‘Site Activities’, and ‘Discussion’ — provide a series of themes into which Sharples has integrated the various specialist contributions. By and large it works very well and, though entailing some repetition, the structure certainly serves to shape the overall analysis and discussion into a coherent book. Few are likely to read it cover to cover, however, so this repetition is probably a strength of the book for those readers selectively dipping in and out. And dip in and out they should, because whatever the difficulties of interpreting some of the deposits, and indeed to what extent their contents are representative of the full range of activities on the site, this provides a model of analysis and discussion.

The Iron Age structural remains — two successive buildings — are disappointing, which is unfortunate. I am inclined to agree with Sharples that in plan at least the earlier was a wheelhouse, albeit one that was so heavily robbed that it will never be an exemplar of their architecture; the form of the later is anybody’s guess. And herein lies the problem, for with a very tight chronology for both buildings in the fifth and sixth centuries AD, it is the identification of the earlier as a wheelhouse that will inevitably divert the focus of debate, rather than the wealth of data and analysis detailing their use. Since the occupation here does not appear to run seamlessly out of a Middle Iron Age settlement, it

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is debatable whether the typical topographical dislocation between wheelhouses and cellular buildings observed by Sharples is represented by the construction of this building or its demolition. Depending on your view, the apparent lack of deep disturbance that the demolition of a wheelhouse would cause is either a problem or points to a solution. But let us not get too distracted, because that would be to miss the point. In drawing together this volume, Sharples has put the ball in the reader's court. We know where he stands, and he has provided us with the wherewithal to reach our own conclusions. This is surely exactly as an excavation report should be.

The title, however, leaves a niggling worry. The majority of British prehistorians who pick up this volume will just as quickly put it down again; wrong Late Iron Age. Early medievalists will probably not even pick it up. This is not the place for a critique of the general chronological framework, but now that we have an extensive radiocarbon chronology, and recognize a transition at AD 400, a time with a much wider resonance, there is no reason to maintain this fiction of a separate Hebridean Iron Age, which carries with it the dangers of marginalizing these remarkable sites as local curiosities, and not just in Scotland. This is an early medieval farmstead, and while its finds assemblage is relatively mundane, it existed in an Atlantic world where exotic imports from the continent into places of power attest wide links and contacts. Floors of structures preserved in the calcareous sands of the Hebridean *machair* have much to tell scholars about life and living on this wider stage. This volume deserves that wider readership.

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