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Book Reviews



A FORGED GLAMOUR: LANDSCAPE, IDENTITY AND MATERIAL CULTURE IN THE IRON AGE. By Melanie Giles. Pp. xiv and 270, Illus 55. Windgather Press, 2012. Price: £30.00. ISBN 978 190511 946 2.

‘...Sifting through the fill of a square barrow burial, in a shallow chalk valley near Garton Station, the digger’s trowel hit something hard and metallic. Carefully easing away the silt, flakes of decayed iron fell away from the stump of an object. It was the circular end of a spearhead, embedded tip down in the grave fill’ (p. 1).

This account of the excavation of a ‘speared corpse’ burial in East Yorkshire opens a comprehensive and provocative volume which will be essential reading for all those interested in Iron Age Britain. Giles’s book focuses particularly on the burials of the ‘Arras culture’, named after the cemetery excavated near Market Weighton. Based on the research of Tony Brewster, Ian Stead and John Dent, amongst others, Giles places this material into a theoretically based post-processual framework.

After introducing eastern Yorkshire’s landscape, particularly the rolling chalk hills of the Yorkshire Wolds, the author chronicles archaeological exploration in the area and includes fascinating anecdotes in the discussion. Early investigators were by no means collegiate, illustrated by a description of the Yorkshire Antiquarian Club, who are termed ‘that pack of asses’ (p. 12). Relations between East Yorkshire’s most famous early archaeologists, Greenwell and Mortimer, were equally acrimonious, making their collaboration in the excavation of the Danes’ Graves cemetery all the more remarkable. The final parts of Chapter 1 provide a critical discourse on migration-invasion hypotheses, proposing other explanations for the similar material culture assemblages observed in this region and the near Continent, and discussing various societal models.

Chapter 2 considers the linear earthworks, one of the best known landscape features of later prehistoric eastern Yorkshire. Many explanations have been proposed for their purpose since Mortimer’s detailed mapping. Giles sees them as relating to stock management and territorial division, but goes beyond purely practical explanations, arguing that the ‘long-term consequences of architecture on this scale, was to alter the way in which rights were negotiated...’ and that through their very construction, they ‘became mnemonics of labour and sweat’ (p. 53).

The following chapters consider the relationship between settlements and cemeteries, discussing the dichotomy between the lack of obvious social differentiation in roundhouses and individuals buried with prestigious artefacts. Giles argues that within

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the cemeteries, possible kinship groups can be recognized (Chapter 4). Analysis of isotopes in skeletons and developments in radiocarbon dating are providing details of diet and chronology beyond the scope of previous investigators. Forensic examination of skeletons has led to a re-acceptance of interpersonal violence. Chapter 5 concentrates on the significance of various grave-goods; each type is considered in a refreshing and detailed way, contrasting with their usual typological presentation.

For some, however, the subsequent chapters which emphasize the theatricality of the burial ritual, and the perception of death as being a journey, may prove too much; interpretation relies heavily on imaginative reconstruction, albeit evidence-based (Chapters 6–7). With this caveat in mind, however, the whole process of a chariot burial must have been an impressive event and one which was surely observed with interest by the spectators and mourners, from the pulling of the vehicle to the graveside, to the careful positioning of the body and the accompanying artefacts.

One of the few weaknesses in the book is the lack of full realization of the importance of iron production on a practical, rather than theoretical, level. Experiments by Peter Crew (Twenty-Five Years of Bloomery Experiments: Perspectives and Prospects, in D. Dungworth and R. C. P. Doonan (eds), *Accidental and Experimental Archaeometallurgy*, 25–51, 2013) have demonstrated the production of 1 kg of bar iron took between eight and twenty-five person days. It is also unlikely that much iron was produced from ‘ore picking over the local chalk soils, supplemented by sources from the Foulness Valley’ (p. 183). Foulness and the Hull Valley bog-ores were easier to smelt than chalk-derived sources. The chariot burials represent the most striking consumption of iron within the region, and it is likely that the Arras and Wetwang-Garton cemeteries, which contain the most chariot burials, are located within relatively easy reach of both iron-producing valleys (P. Halkon, Iron, Landscape and Power in Iron Age East Yorkshire, *Archaeol. J.* **168**, 133–65, 2012).

Whilst being lucid and readable for the most part, occasionally I felt that some passages are too abstract in style. All in all, however, this book provides an important addition to our knowledge of Iron Age Britain, promoting some of its most spectacular archaeology.

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