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Book Reviews



IRON AGE HILLFORTS IN BRITAIN AND BEYOND. By Dennis W. Harding. Pp. xvi and 334, Illus 87. Oxford University Press, 2012. Price: £75.00. ISBN 978 019969 524 9.

Since James Dyer's Shire volume on hillforts of 1981 (*Hillforts of England and Wales*), some twenty-five years passed before another book on the subject was published, by Ian Ralston in 2006 (*Celtic Fortifications*), followed by that of this reviewer in 2009 (*Beacons in the Landscapes: the Hillforts of England and Wales*). Professor Harding's account is, thus, the latest and most welcomed addition to, what is hoped, will be a 'flowering' of discussion.

Although the non-discounted price will probably be out of the range of most students' pockets, you are encouraged to visit your nearest library to read what is a most scholarly and interesting book. There are eleven, adequately illustrated, chapters, with thirty-two centre-fold colour plates devoted to general landscape and interior views. These are complemented by seventy-one figures within the text. The reader will note that only nine in total are devoted to sites outside Britain and Ireland, and this will indicate the emphasis of the book as being, primarily, on the British Isles, despite a chapter on 'Ethnographic Models' considering New Zealand, North America and West Africa. One has the feeling that continental sites could have been considered in more detail.

The first chapter, 'Defining Issues', looks at hillforts in general: from enclosure to topography, and morphology to function. However, the fundamental question of how these monuments are defined in the first place does seem to have been skated-over somewhat. Were, indeed, hillforts 'community sites, serving a social unit larger than a single family or household' (p. 5)? The jury is out on this question; hillforts tend to be defined differently in differing parts of the country. Chapter 2 gives a good account of past hillfort study from early field survey and looks to the potential for future work, but the rather care-worn observations that much investigation is now 'community' based (pp. 50–51) leads one to question whether there is, in fact, anything wrong with this. The reader will make up his/her own mind, no doubt influenced by experience of hunting for project finance in these straitened times.

Chapters 3 and 4 look at hillfort anatomy, including the ramparts, ditches and entrances, guard chambers and outworks. Of particular interest, and much neglected in hillfort research, is the section on close-proximity to external settlement. Perhaps this has been partly the result of research strategies being confined to ramparts and interiors because of financial constraints. However, what was going on outside enclosure confines is important. Following on from this, Chapter 5 looks at 'Hillforts in the Landscape' from a

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case study viewpoint, with the Danebury and Trapain Law environs and Upper Eskdale projects forming the focus for discussion. *Oppida* are outlined, but the section on landscapes which are devoid of hillforts is noted; the ringworks of eastern England, and the landscapes of eastern Yorkshire and Atlantic Scotland, are taken as examples.

Chapter 6 considers chronology, from at least the Neolithic to the early historic sites of northern Britain. All of this adds to the view that hillforts were not creatures of the Iron Age *per se*, and, unusually, the vexed question of the place of the forty-five thousand or so Irish ringforts is addressed. Hillfort function is much discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, which outline many of the current ideas in some detail, with the former chapter concentrating on defence and conflict: a much debated topic. As Harding states, the causes of conflict can be ‘infinite’, but were hillforts in times of conflict ‘a refuge of last resort’ (p. 179)? Similarly, to dismiss their ability to ‘control’ territory or routes of communication that the monuments overlook (p. 179) ignores clear geographical and locational evidence to the contrary. Chapter 8 considers social, economic and ritual aspects, and the possible role of hillforts in burial ritual gives much food for thought and is re-visited in Chapter 11.

Chapter 9 outlines ‘Documentary Sources’, from the classical authors to early historic writings, whilst Chapter 10 looks at a selection of ethnographic examples, from the New Zealand Pā, to the less-known North American palisaded settlements of the Iroquois and Huron tribes of the Great Lakes and their environs, and to west African fortified villages and towns. Finally, Chapter 11, on conclusions, poses many questions: on defence, ritual, social and economic factors. One point does, however, catch the eye; the need to examine immediate hillfort exteriors more thoroughly. Could this be the key to hillfort function? We shall see. This is a good book and highly recommended.

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