



The Archaeological Journal

Book Reviews



EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY: 1. EARLY BRONZE AGE CREMATION PYRES. 2. IRON AGE GRAIN STORAGE. By Alistair Marshall. Pp. 164, Illus 85. Archaeopress (British Archaeological Reports British Series, **530**), 2011. Price £40.00 ISBN 978 140730 786 2.

Experimental archaeology has formed an important part of the discipline since the 1960s and 1970s. Key figures, such as John Coles and Peter Reynolds, helped establish a methodology and agenda for experimental archaeology which is still relevant today (e.g. J. Coles: *Experimental Archaeology*, 1979). Recent literature in the discipline has tended to be of mixed quality and, as Alan Outram has highlighted, some publications lack the necessary aims, context, methodologies and detail (Introduction to *Experimental Archaeology*, *World Archaeology* **40(1)**, 1–6, 2008). Alistair Marshall's book cannot be placed in this category.

The volume presents the results of two experimental archaeology projects: namely the reconstruction of Bronze Age cremation pyres and the use of Iron Age pits for storing grain. The experiments were grounded in the replication of the archaeology from case study sites in Gloucester, namely the round barrows at Guiting Power and the pits from the Iron Age enclosure of The Park. The research context and aims for each project are clearly set out, and the series of experiments were planned, executed and recorded meticulously. The experimental pyre sites were subjected to detailed excavation and geophysical survey, enhancing the interpretation of site formation processes whilst also informing the methodologies for investigating *in situ* features in the field. The excavation of experimental sites to investigate taphonomic processes is not new (e.g. M. Bell et al.: *The Experimental Earthwork Project, 1960–1962*, 1996), but it is certainly not standard practice either.

Part I discusses the reconstructions of Bronze Age cremation pyres, so as to understand the ephemeral postholes and burnt spreads observed beneath the Bronze Age round barrows at Guiting Power and Trelystan. The data from two experimental pyre sites are outlined, in terms of construction techniques and quantities of materials required (pp. 15–20) and the burning process and consumption of the body and pyre goods (pp. 21–26). For legal reasons, only modified sheep carcasses were cremated. However, the main aims were not so much to explore the cremation of human remains, but rather the traces which are left in the archaeological record. This was established through excavation and survey, providing important insights on the ephemeral nature of the resulting ash bed, as well as the preservation conditions for different materials, namely pottery, flint and metal (pp. 28–9). The magnetic susceptibility survey of Pyre 1 closely matched that of the survey carried out at Guiting Power round barrow 1. The overall result is a convincing

The final version of this review will appear in *The Archaeological Journal* 169 for 2012.

reconstruction of the sequence of events at the round barrow, and the benefit of using magnetic susceptibility to identify pyre sites is clearly demonstrated. Pyre Site 2 was buried and awaits future study.

Part II concerns the reconstruction of Iron Age grain storage pits, with the aim of investigating the efficiency of unsealed storage pits, which differ from the traditional model of the sealed pit. The experiments were carried out in a variety of differently sized pits which were excavated at The Park. The efficiency of different lining and sealing strategies was tested. Two large pits, traditionally classified as ‘silo-pits’ for silage production, were filled with grain and left open, only protected with thatched timber covers. The grain was stored for six months and conditions within the pits were carefully monitored. The results confirm previous observations that pits are effective in preserving the grain from germination or decay. However, the larger unsealed pits were found to be just as effective as the sealed pits, with the former actually displaying lower levels of moisture. Marshall claims that his experiment ‘proves ventilated pit storage as a superior method with many practical advantages over sealing’ (p. 83). While this is debateable, particularly given the short time-span of the experiments (sealed pits have a life span of five–ten years), the data confirms that the larger pits may well have provided short-term, accessible grain storage facilities (p. 117).

The book is not without its problems. The two parts are presented as separate articles, and there is no preface or introduction to the volume. It thus lacks integration and context. There are occasional issues with structure and the text is sometimes dense and overly detailed (e.g. pp. 6–7, 28–35, 87–95). The figures are of excellent quality but they are presented in appendices and these are divorced from the figure captions. This is not helpful given their importance to the analysis. Formatting issues and typographical errors do occur occasionally throughout the book (e.g. pp. 5, 83, 86, 90, 104, 114). These are small issues, however, and the book makes an important contribution to the discipline of experimental archaeology.

KATE WADDINGTON