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Book Reviews



HOARDS, HOUNDS AND HELMETS. A CONQUEST-PERIOD RITUAL SITE AT HALLATON, LEICESTERSHIRE. By Vicki Score. Pp. xvii and 302, Illus 109. Leicester Archaeology, 2011. ISBN 978 0 956017 96 3.

There cannot be many people interested in Roman Britain who have not heard of the spectacular discovery of a Roman parade helmet at Hallaton, in Leicestershire. The helmet went on display in January 2012, accompanied by a fanfare of media comment which focused on how this first-century ceremonial head-gear got to what is now Leicestershire. Of course, there was a lot more to Hallaton than just a helmet, and this report admirably describes the nature of the site, its chronology, and details the various categories of finds. The whole Hallaton story is also a triumph for Leicestershire County Council's Community Archaeology Programme, since the site was discovered by a local group and its members were involved throughout.

Most of the work was carried out between 2001–5 with further small-scale excavations in 2008–9. The excavations were undertaken after initial field walking discoveries, and uncovered a length of ditch, with an entrance on the eastern side of a hill. Around the entrance and in the ditches were extraordinary finds. Sometime in the early first century AD, silver artefacts, coins, and other objects were deposited in the ditch, at the same time that feasting debris, mostly pig bones, were dumped east of the entrance. Coin hoards were placed in the entrance-way around the time of the Roman invasion, and the helmet components and yet more coins were buried in a pit on the line of the ditched boundary. Intensive ritual activity appears to have ended shortly afterwards, although there are hints of offerings into the second century AD and again in the late Roman period.

Hallaton also yielded the largest assemblage of Iron Age coins ever recovered under controlled archaeological conditions in Britain. Buried in fabric pouches they constitute at least fourteen different hoards. Roman coins, much in the minority, were found in eight of the hoards. Most of the Iron Age coinage was local, but cannot necessarily be interpreted as the output of a single 'tribe'. Instead, the number of differently inscribed coins suggests that they may mark a phase of explicit competition between issuing elites. The helmet was buried upside down in the pit, accompanied by three pairs of incomplete cheek-pieces, indicating that more than one helmet had reached this part of Britain. The parts of at least three dogs were also retrieved from the entrance area and ditch and the authors surmise that these animals may have been guardians of presumably what lay within the enclosure, higher up the hill. Astonishingly, the animal remains, many from pits outside the entrance, comprised 97 % juvenile pigs, almost certainly the remains of ritual meals and feasts, the oddity being their distinct lack of right forelimbs.

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Of the final two chapters it is the last, by Colin Haselgrove, that is more thought-provoking. Haselgrove rightly flags up the idea that some previous caches of Iron Age coins might be from acts of multiple burial. Additionally, the early Arretine ware from Leicester, located some 20 km to the north-west, coupled with the finds from Hallaton itself, reinforce the notion that not all pre-conquest contacts from the Continent were with south-east Britain. He speculates that a local chief was possibly one of the several who surrendered to Claudius and was rewarded with the helmet(s).

Some archaeological discoveries inevitably stimulate further speculation. If the hill was visited over a generation by competing groups, then these may have been motivated by varying ideologies resulting in a variety of depositional practices. Feasting in itself can be a highly competitive activity, and the lack of right forelimbs may indicate that someone was counting which group brought just how many pigs to the table. Additionally, societies under a perceived threat, as presumably some were in this area in AD 43, may well invest greater efforts in ritualized activities and such a scenario could account for the climactic phase at Hallaton. Finally, why were the helmet(s) buried in a pit, and why upside down? If they did reach this area of Britain as a chiefly reward, their deposition in a pit conceivably hints that chiefly betrayal may have been a factor.

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