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Book Reviews



LIVING BY THE SWORD: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF BRISLEY FARM, ASHFORD, KENT. By Jim Stevenson. Pp. xxiv and 399, Illus 275. Spoilheap Publications (Spoilheap Monograph Series, 6). Price: £35.00. ISBN 978 095588 468 9.

In this important monograph, Jim Stevenson and colleagues report on excavations undertaken between 1998 and 2009 at Brisley Farm, just south of Ashford in the Kentish Weald. As Tim Champion notes in his foreword (p. xxiii), future generations may well come to see the two decades leading up to the financial crisis of 2008 as a ‘golden age’, when our archaeological knowledge of much of Britain was transformed by large-scale development-led interventions. Thanks to High Speed 1 (HS1) and other infrastructure projects, this leap forward has been especially marked in Kent, much of which was previously under-researched, not least because of the difficulty of finding sites on the Weald Clay. Weald Clay can also be a nightmare to dig, as the excavators of Brisley Farm found; it says much for their skill and perseverance that so much important archaeology was recorded.

All told, nine area excavations, totalling 7.4 ha, were undertaken at Brisley Farm, plus a further excavation at Christchurch Church of England High School, 800 m to the north-east. The first evidence of permanent settlement — a scatter of pits at Christchurch School — belongs to the later second millennium BC. In the Late Bronze Age, an extensive organized system of rectilinear fields and tracks was imposed over the landscape. As figure 2.9 shows, this was only one of several similar field systems revealed along the route of HS1 through the Weald. The implication is clear: far from being largely avoided until medieval times, as we once thought, even the heavy Weald clays were densely settled in the later Bronze Age.

Following a hiatus of several centuries, a Late Iron Age enclosure, perhaps for stock, was established at Brisley Farm. This settlement grew rapidly, with enclosures, buildings and tracks present in several parts of the site, but especially in Areas 3–4. The ‘stars of the show’ were undoubtedly the two weapon burials found within the settlement, the first (BC2) interred around the start of the first century AD, the other (BC1) a generation or so later. Less than fifty burials of this type are known nationally and they are usually isolated, so the discovery of two side-by-side in adjacent square-ditched enclosures poses some intriguing questions, which are explored at length in a valuable discussion in Chapter 6, but owing to the nature of the evidence cannot all be answered. Were the individuals related? Both were aged between eighteen and twenty-five years, but unfortunately the skeletal remains were too poorly preserved for their sex to be determined or DNA extracted. Why was the spear in BC2 thrust across the body, as in a symbolic spearing, whereas the spear in BC1 had been bent to render it beyond use? Both

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phenomena recur in other burials, but why? The swords are typical insular weapons of the period, but the circular shield boss in BC1 is essentially a Roman type in Britain. Is this significant?

Both burials contained imported whiteware beakers, and BC1 a *Terra Nigra* platter. The imports were evidently the main driver in reaching a dating for the burials (pp. 157, 162), in my view resulting in a somewhat later date than is strictly required. BC2 could be as much as two decades earlier, whilst BC1 could be pre-Claudian. Despite yielding a useful pottery assemblage, Brisley Farm lacked diagnostic metalwork associations that would help resolve continuing uncertainties over the dating of the later Iron Age in Kent, nor were any radiocarbon dates obtained for these phases. It is clear, however, that intensive occupation ceased soon after the Conquest, although some activities carried on until the second century AD.

A millennium passed, punctuated only by the odd feature, until the thirteenth century, when a new enclosure system was established, followed by two farms, each represented by buildings and yards. The earlier of the medieval farms was abandoned in the mid-fourteenth century, around the time of the Black Death, but its southern neighbour continued in use until the post-medieval period and may be the direct ancestor of the existing farm. A second post-medieval farm located at the north-western limit of the development was only tangentially investigated.

Whilst the weapon burials will inevitably attract the most attention, this should not deflect from other equally significant aspects of the report. Stevenson's thoughtful reconstruction of the spatial dynamics and functional zoning of the Late Iron Age settlement offers a fine model of what can be achieved through analysis of artefact deposits and feature distributions, whilst there is much of interest for medievalists. Overall, the report is well-presented, with good use of colour and reproduction drawings, and few errors. Unfortunately, the integration of certain specialist contributions in the chronological narrative has created some duplication of both text (e.g. Val Rigby's discussion of the imports on pp. 157 and 161–62 effectively repeats pp. 278–80) and figures (the puddingstone quern is illustrated as figs 4.10 and 10.15), adding to the length and presumably cost of the volume. The brooch from BC2 is variously presented (e.g. pp. 165, 315) but only identified for what it is — a Colchester type — on page 172. Nevertheless, this repetition is a minor blemish on what is certainly one of the most significant and stimulating monographs so far to have emerged from the 'golden age' of Kentish archaeology.

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