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Book Reviews



EXCAVATIONS AT GRIMES GRAVES, NORFOLK, 1972-1976: FASCICULE 6.
By Ian Longworth, Gillian Varndell, and Jacek Lech. Pp. 208, Illus 152. British Museum Press, 2012. Price: £60.00. ISBN 978 071412 331 8.

Flint mining is an enormously exciting prehistoric Northern European phenomenon on the chalk, encompassing the UK, Belgium, France, Denmark and Sweden. While dating evidence is limited, most of the UK flint mines appear to date from the early to mid-Neolithic; Grimes Graves is the largest and latest of these, being dated to the Late Neolithic. Research over the last two decades has demonstrated that mine sites exhibit social activity where art, mortuary practice and depositional events took place. They *were* extraction sites but also inhabited, active, spaces.

This volume is the last in a series of six that chronicle the excavations which took place at Grimes Graves between 1972 and 1976 by a team led by the British Museum that included the Prehistoric Mining Group of the Geological Society of Holland. This series also documents some previous excavations and work at Grimes Graves that was hitherto unpublished, creating a corpus of material beyond the four seasons' work. This final volume was published thirty-six years after the end of the excavations, detailing the work in the 'West Field' which examined the extent of mining in this area. As with the previous fascicules, much more data and discussion is included than an average excavation report. The work suggests that many more shafts may be present at Grimes Graves than previously estimated (as the tops of shafts can be masked by later activity), hence the estimated number of shafts here has risen from *c.* 366 to in excess of four hundred (p. 172). Chapter Five gives an account on the identification of the provenances of the flint axes by chemical analysis (Craddock et al., pp. 145–57) with the aims of re-examining previous work on the movement of flint axes from source to use or deposition, and identifying more accurately flint sources within the locality of Grimes Graves. The work confirmed that few Grimes Graves artefacts appear within contemporary Wessex monuments (pp. 146–7) and, moreover, the flint from Grimes Graves was utilized to produce many different artefacts types: it was not just used for axes (pp. 154–55).

Estimating the time taken to excavate shafts and galleries is difficult, though it has been suggested that Greenwell's Pit at Grimes Graves, one of the largest shafts in the country, took *c.* ninety-three days to dig (p. 174). Extrapolating these figures to four hundred shafts (between two and eight per year) produces a fifty- to two hundred-year span of mining activity. As the phosphate survey did not identify areas of occupation, it is suggested that small acts of mining most probably took place over the longer period of time. Yet, the application of Bayesian modelling to the British Neolithic suggests a compression of time previously envisaged at sites such as chambered tombs and

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causewayed enclosures. Flint mines have escaped this analysis due to a lack of research to obtain more radiocarbon dates, though we should perhaps look to the Bayesian results for inspiration and a shorter duration for flint mining remains a possibility.

It is almost inevitable that after such a passage of time the authors have concerns that, with hindsight, their hopes for the project were perhaps beyond the methodologies or analytical tools available at the time (p. 179). I think we should be more forgiving. Flint mines are complex archaeological sites. To produce quality work that will be referred to for decades to come is no mean feat and should be applauded.

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