

REVIEW

Review of *Westward on the High-Hilled Plains. The Later Prehistory of the West Midlands*

Series: The Making of the West Midlands by Derek Hurst (ed.), Oxbow Books, 2017, Vol. 2 (160 pages, b/w and colour), ISBN: 9781785704116

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Westward on the High-Hilled Plains. The Later Prehistory of the West Midlands is the second volume of the project *The Making of the West Midlands*. This is an ambitious six-volume series which puts together the proceedings originally presented at the seminars held, between June 2002 and June 2003, under the title the *West Midlands Regional Research Framework for Archaeology*. This second book of the series, edited by Derek Hurst, complements the assessment and research agenda for later prehistory (Hurst 2011) more recently published in *The Archaeology of West Midlands: a framework for research* (Watt 2011) and focuses on the Late Prehistory of the West Midland region, from the Middle Bronze age to the Late Iron Age.

Keywords: Late Prehistory; Bronze Age; Iron Age; Public Archaeology; Landscape Archaeology

With a title based on the poem by Alfred E. Housman; this edition is published almost ten years after the first in the series (Garwood 2007), and is divided in thirteen chapters. It is worth noting that the original seminar papers have been under revision since 2011, giving us an idea of the speed of the publication process for commercial archaeology volumes. The papers have been arranged so that the first two chapters, an

introduction (Niall Sharples) and a survey of environmental evidence (Elizabeth Pearson), are followed by papers in chronological and regional order. These constitute a review of the Bronze Age and Iron Age periods in each county: Warwickshire and Solihull (Stuart Palmer), Herefordshire (Peter Darling, Keith Ray and Paul White), Shropshire (Andy Wigley), Staffordshire (Chris Wardle) and Worcestershire (Derek Hurst). The last four chapters present a global view, with two (Chapters 10 and 11) dedicated to material culture (by Annette Hancocks and Angie Bolton), and two (Chapters 12 and 13)

dedicated to production and trade in the Late Prehistory (Derek Hurst) and landscapes and settlement at the Iron Age (Andy Wigley). The result is a well-presented volume that provides a general overview of the Late Prehistory in the West Midlands.

Chapter 1, introduces the West Midland region, presenting it as a consequence of modern political and economic developments, rather than to historical settlements or topography. However, Sharples mentions aspects of the West Midlands archaeology, such as early and dense occupied hillforts and their associated material culture, that reflect the archaeological importance of the region. According to the author, the analysis of these finds has been almost entirely restricted to the ceramic record and only recently have other fascinating discoveries been analysed: such as the burial deposits from Bredon Hill (Western and Hurst 2013) or the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age settlement at Whitchurch (Waddington and Sharples 2011). Although the identification of Late Bronze Age sites could be considered as a challenge, Sharples successfully establishes the archaeological potential of the West Midlands region, and even allows himself a little bit of criticism in regards to the lack of funding for undertaking research excavations in the area.

Chapter 2, written by Elizabeth Pearson, addresses the contribution of environmental archaeology in the study of landscape and farming of the Late Prehistory. It focuses on the importance of palaeoenvironmental data collection even in areas, such as the West Midlands, where animal bone and charred plant remains are scarce. After a review of the evidence, it addresses the research priorities that need to be systematically employed when deposits suitable for palaeoenvironmental studies are available. Gaps in the Late Prehistory of the West Midlands seem to have been caused by a lack of site-based work, environmental and geoarchaeology research. If these aspects are taken into account, they will permit a deeper understanding of

the processes and chronology of landscape change. Each author explicitly discusses the importance of systematic data and sample collection, with reliable and precise site dating being a must-do technique in every possible site. It is needed, they argue— to relegate to history the old-fashioned method of using pottery as a proxy dating tool, and provide reliable dates for the archaeological record.

After an overview, in the following chapters (Chapter 3 to 9), of the Late prehistorical archaeology evidence in each county, Chapters 10 and 11 are focused on material culture. Hancocks (Chapter 10) presents a summary of the ceramic record, from the scarcity of the Middle Bronze Age, towards an increase of ceramic production during the Late Bronze and Iron Ages. The chapter presents the available evidence, and the author concludes by setting up future research priorities, in line with what other researchers also mention: the need for regular and systematic radiocarbon dating coupled with the need for extensive analysis of ceramic fabrics and spatial data.

In Chapter 11, Bolton focuses on the material culture of the Iron Age recorded by the West Midlands Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS). Not only has this scheme proved to be of great success (as the comparison between discoveries made by Museums and the PAS shows), but Bolton also presents a broad review of the evidence, complementing the text with high quality graphics, pictures and archaeological illustrations. Spatial representation of Iron Age coins within the West Midlands region is also provided. In a similar way, Hurst reconstructs the prehistoric production and trade in the West Midlands through material evidence. Thus, different goods; such as salt, pottery, currency bars and coins, are tracked in relation to society, politics, status and cultural identity. Finally, Wigley reviews Iron Age landscape and settlement patterns in the West Midlands, addressing methodologies that should be developed for a better understanding of the Iron Age society. These are routine absolute

dating techniques, non-invasive survey, palaeoenvironmental sampling and adoption of a landscape approach, among others.

While being an ambitious work, and despite being a visually attractive volume, *Westward on the High-Hilled Plains* does not fully satisfy this reviewer, especially when looking at its price (£30) in relation to its 160 pages. Furthermore, despite its recent publication date, this volume seems to be slightly out of date. It suffers from a significant lack of recent analysis and updated revisions of the archaeological evidence. Sadly, in most cases the chapters vary very little from the seminar papers published back in 2002, which are actually available online (see Pearson 2002 for an example). Similarly, and given the digital age in which we live in, some of the illustrations in this book do not possess the quality that would be expected in a publication of this type. In the same way and although expressing the importance that aerial photography has for field research, relatively new survey and aerial photography methods, which are now highly accessible and are increasingly low in cost, are not taken into account in the present volume.

Having said that, it is worth mentioning that the book will surely attract the attention of researchers on the subject. Chapter 5, written by Stuart C. Palmer, provides an extraordinarily summary of the available data and resources for the Warwickshire and Solihull area. It is actually the only chapter that includes a list of mentioned sites together with their references. Moreover, it also presents a detailed and organized compendium of radiocarbon dates (pp. 41–48) which should be the starting point for any Late Prehistory work in the region. This is especially significant because, although many of the authors argue for the necessity of reliable and systematic dating methods, only few of them provide absolute dates. Nevertheless, this is a well edited book, with enough illustrative and informative site distribution maps. Its, to some extent,

outdated information can be understood as a consequence of the difficulties that the present work had to get published.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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