Prehistory in the Peak

By Mark Edmonds and Tim Seaborne
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Reviewed by Vicki Cummings

Introduction

Mark Edmonds' latest book is a rare treat for prehistorians: the combination of a beautifully written text with wonderfully evocative photographs. I enjoyed this volume enormously, and would recommend it as both genuine value for money and as a good read. Although the focus is on the evidence from the Peak District, the scope of this book goes well beyond this specific area of Britain. The interpretations and general discussions in particular are relevant to all parts of the British Isles and in many ways this book is an excellent introduction to a number of key issues and ideas within each period. The volume is not flawless, however, in particular the lack of references and the use of a range of narrative styles will not be to everyone's taste. However, this book represents an important milestone in the way we present regional archaeologies, and in the use of a range of different prose styles and images to make important theoretical points.

Content

The book is divided into ten chapters, beginning with the Palaeolithic and moving through to the Iron Age and Roman period. The chapters break roughly into periods, but with four chapters on the Neolithic, two on the Bronze Age and only one on the Iron Age. The strongest sections are arguably those that deal with earlier prehistory, in particular the Neolithic. I particularly liked the sections on stone working, the building and use of henges and the significance of caves in the Peak. The sections on the Bronze Age are neat also, drawing on themes of changing relations with the land but also ritual continuity. However, Edmonds seems to run out of steam when he reaches the Iron Age, making only very general points about this period in the area.

Throughout the volume, Edmonds weaves together a series of current theoretical issues within the broader narrative. This works extremely well, as the theory blends seamlessly with description and details on specifics. In particular there are lengthy discussions on the significance of landscape and particular locales in the landscape, which are particularly strong. There is also Edmonds' characteristic emphasis on the importance of the everyday engagement with places and things. One gets a real sense of engagement and dwelling with this book, a sense of activity and movement as well as the creation of more special places. Edmonds also promotes the idea that there was gradual change throughout prehistory so that the ideas and values of one generation flowed into those of the next. He suggests that people may not have been aware of the bigger changes that we identify when studying prehistory. But throughout the book I wondered if this were really the case in the past, in particular because the view promoted here comes across almost as timeless. For example, the sense of attachment to place in the Neolithic seems virtually identical to that in the Bronze Age. However, should we perhaps consider the idea that there were short periods of relative stability followed by dramatic changes which had a major and profound impact on people and their lives?

Saying that, Edmonds really does seem to get to grips with notions of community and engagement. There is also a sense that the past was not homogeneous but diverse and varied throughout the Peak. The reader is never left lacking about the connections between people and the landscape, both in the past and in the present, and the persistence of place. It is also good to see that the present-day walkers, archaeologists and farmers are as present in this volume as the ghosts of the people of the past.
Style

The book combines more traditional archaeological discussion with a whole series of narratives. Both of these formats work very well. Edmonds has a lovely writing style which really engages the reader, moving deftly from topic to topic with flowing prose and lyrical language. The book moves quickly from data to idea to discussion, never bogged down with lengthy reference to broader debates, while still addressing current issues. I also liked the short narratives which are interspersed throughout the text and which also appear at the beginning of each chapter. These narratives are usually from a more modern point of view, and really add to the overall flavour of the area. They also serve to break up the more dense and descriptive text which forms the bulk of the volume.

One of the most attractive elements of this volume are the accompanying pictures taken by Tim Seaborne. These range from details of characteristic landscape features such as distinctive outcrops to general shots of hills and more traditional images of specific monuments. Interspersed with these are photographs from the modern landscape: cows in a field with a sign for walkers, archaeologists on excavation and a sheep being sheared. I liked this combination of images as they give a real sense of place, not just a sense of a landscape that existed in prehistory but the active and lived-in landscape of today. The images are extremely effective in the overall flow of the narrative, juxtaposing ideas about the past with modern images. The effectiveness of these photographs should be noted by all authors producing illustrated volumes, as these images really emphasise the power of the visual in our presentation of ideas.

Audience and References

One of the biggest problems with this volume concerns the audience at which it is aimed, and more specifically, the lack of references in the text. My feeling was the book was perhaps too academic for most amateurs, as they may find it difficult to follow some of the ideas which have an established tradition within archaeological theory but are not so well known within mainstream, popularist archaeology (I am thinking here of issues such as landscape, the culture/nature dichotomy and visuality). The book contains perhaps too much background information for the professional academic, and is at times frustratingly general. I wanted to know more about the specifics of individual sites in particular. Therefore the audience for which this book seems most suited is the undergraduate, postgraduate or informed amateur, who would really benefit from reading such a well-written and engaging volume. However, it also perhaps the student who would benefit most from having references in the text, so that they could follow up specific ideas in more detail. Some students may not realise, for example, that there is a substantial literature on landscape which is woven into the narrative but is never explicitly referenced. Although I very much enjoyed reading a book that was not weighed down with extensive in-text references, ultimately I felt that this is one of the key drawbacks with this book: the content is essentially academic yet the style is not. This was one the general criticisms raised about Edmonds’ previous book, Ancestral Geographies of the Neolithic (1999), and I think it is relevant here also.

Another element of the volume, which is both its strength and weakness, is the sole use of photographs to illustrate the text. There are no traditional plans of monuments or sites, and no pictures or illustrations of artefacts. It is therefore interesting that Edmonds has decided at the very end of the book to include a few traditional distribution maps. These appear as almost an after-thought, a concession to traditional ways of representation and the legitimisation of the archaeological narrative. In many ways I was disappointed to find these maps, however useful, in the volume, as it is as if the pictures do not speak quite loudly enough for themselves. I felt that Edmonds should have either gone for photographs alone, which would have made a strong creative statement, or to integrate maps and more traditional plans and illustrations into the book in combination with the photos. As it is, it seems a compromise between tradition and art.
**Conclusion**

There are undoubtedly a few problems with Edmonds' new book, in particular regarding issues of representing the past and of referencing. However, I would like to emphasise that this is an extremely well-written book which draws the reader through the prehistoric landscapes of the Peak. Furthermore, this volume is not just an introduction to this particular area of Britain but stands as a strong introduction to many key issues in prehistory, in particular in relation to the Neolithic and Bronze Age. In addition, the combination of evocative photographs and a range of narratives is a really refreshing change and provides a book that both students and professionals alike can enjoy. This volume shows that there can be other ways of telling which are as apposite and engaging as traditional academic volumes.

**Bibliography**


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