Reconstructing Iron Age Societies.

Edited by A. Gwilt and C. Haselgrove.


Review by Melanie Giles.

The hefty, grey-green tome *Reconstructing Iron Age Societies*, edited by Adam Gwilt and Colin Haselgrove, publishes papers from the Iron Age research seminars at Cambridge (1989), Edinburgh (1992) and Durham (1994). These seminars are often small affairs, where key figures in the discipline gather together to exchange ideas and present research in a forum more intimate than the usual conference. At £35, this volume does for the Iron Age what Barrett and Kinnes' *The Archaeology of Context in the Neolithic and Bronze Age* (1988) did for earlier prehistory; it presents in one book, to a wider audience than the conference-goers, an up-to-date summary of current theory and practice in Iron Age studies.

Herein may be found all manner of authors: lecturers, students, fieldworkers and members of institutions such as Historic Scotland and the Peak National Park, the National Museum of Scotland and the Royal Commission for Historic Monuments in England (RCHME). This is testament to the skill with which the editors (and conference organisers) have sought out papers on a vast range of topics, some given at the conferences, but others tucked into the volume at a later date.

Amongst this mass of 31 papers, there are general subject trends: some provide an overview of changes within 'Iron Age' theory (Adam Gwilt and Colin Haselgrove, John Collis, Chris Gosden), others re-analyse material assemblages (Ann Woodward, Elaine Morris and Lisa Brown, Richard Hingley, Colin Haselgrove, J.D. Hill and David Dungworth) or make detailed studies of the structural and material patterning of sites (Adam Gwilt, John Pearce, Jeremy Taylor, Christopher Evans, Jane Downes, Colin Haselgrove and Martin Millet). There are also regional surveys with social readings of the spatial patterning of sites in the landscape (Bill Bevan, Jeremy Taylor, Steve Willis, Christopher Evans, Gill Ferrell, Stewart Bryant and Rosalind Niblett).

It is especially welcome that these case studies provide views from the Western Isles and Northumbria, the Wolds and East Anglia, Scotland and the East Midlands, as well as the well-trampled landscapes of Wessex and the south-east. A sense of multiple and clamorous voices is thus engendered in the volume's spirit of research, even to the point of an internal 'debate' between Ian Armit and Mike Parker Pearson/Niall Sharples, over the interpretation of brochs.
My criticism of the book might seem churlish in light of the diversity of these papers, but several points spring to mind. Some of these papers were presented over nine years ago and inevitably ideas have been reproduced and discussed thoroughly since then, to the point where they have achieved 'common place' in Iron Age studies, a product of this book's own temporality. However, if the general tone of the volume is rarely dramatic, with only occasional disharmony (as between Mike Parker Pearson, Niall Sharples and Ian Armit), then perhaps this is to be congratulated; many post-processual archaeologists feared that common approaches to archaeological practice would never emerge from the theoretical rhetoric of the 1980s. In contrast, here Gosden looks forward with enthusiasm to a decade to come of analysis and synthesis.

However, it is not this familiarity with ideas and case studies which unsettles me. Although we should celebrate the fact that many of these authors have developed coherent approaches to practice, most notably coalescing around themes of space and place, social life and its materiality, this should engender 'different' Iron Ages, as Hill and Cumberpatch envisaged (1995). In 'Ways of Telling' (1992), John Berger argues that the way in which we write and present the lives of others should articulate the lived experience of those people. The words and the images should engage us; riveted in the small passions and preoccupations, they must capture both the historical condition of those lives as well as the immanent possibility of change. If we cannot create through that work a sense of this difference, the past is truly a creation in our own, familiar image. Does this book address such themes? Most of the authors deal with historical time, with the time of processes made meaningful by their overall patterning. It is the time of site plan analysis, of aerial archaeology, of change laid bare after its unravelling by the archaeologist. It is the level at which interpretation is made. It is not, however, a level of living temporality, of lived experience. We know that the smeared, scoured and scuffed fragments with which we deal are the remnants of Iron Age peoples' inhabitation of the world and the ways in which they made sense of it, yet seldom does this emerge through current archaeological writing.

Some of the authors here do capture in their writing a great intimacy and knowledge of the landscape, as in Christopher Evans' evocation of the 'hydraulic communities of the Fens' (pp. 216-227). However, in attempting to convey the particular 'flavour' of their regional history some of these papers mask change over time and different histories within their areas. These landscapes, as Chris Gosden warns us in his commentary (pp. 303-307), are both accretion and montage. The land has a geomorphological history, which has influenced what has survived to the present day. In a more sustained narrative, such concerns might have been better developed; but this was not the aim of the editors nor the purpose of the volume and should not be judged as such. In general, I feel that the work of most of the authors sits uneasily with one of Chris Gosden's comments, where he argues that we need to seek the
broader generalities, the common character of the period, which such a 'local' landscape focus may not supply. He suggests that these are essential discourses with which the local is bound up. He talks of tempos of work and knowledge, which stretch out beyond the individual; the process of socialisation which allows for agency whilst understanding community as something greater than the individual. If I have correctly understood his argument, the assumption is that at a larger scale, these interdigitated temporalities of action may make some kind of coherent history and -- more than that -- that this is an appropriate level for analysis. This is in keeping with his work on temporality, which has sought to capture how the 'long term' can be thought through in archaeology. I, like Matthew Johnson, in his 'iron'ic commentary (pp. 308-311), am concerned by this: processes 'read' at this level often have difficulty in capturing the way in which structure and agency intersect in people's everyday efforts to make sense of their world.

Jane Downes' paper on the 'shrine' at Cadbury, for example, stands in direct contrast with this position (pp. 145-152). Refusing to take an archaeological 'category' as an adequate interpretation, she insists on contextualising the material around a six-post structure, N5, in relation to its position within the rest of the hillfort. She talks about the way in which its architecture was locked into memory; how this aping of the form of a granary presenced ideas of fertility and food, in a space within the enclosure where no such building had ever existed. She argues that the community knew this, that they deliberately evoked the economic and social fabric of their knowledge at a time of crisis, and bound it into a new set of practices connected with ancestry and reproduction. She thus explores the historical and material conditions within which this building came to have meaning. Memory is embedded in its wood, yet the acts of sacrifice and burial around it shatter and remould those meanings into a new discourse. Meaning unfolds through the connections that have been made at this human level. Moving between that delicate balance of agency and structure that others pay academic lip-service to, what stands out is the feeling of people, weighty, memory-laden, gifted, making sense of their world through action, despite changing conditions over which they were trying to wrestle some control.

My other concern with the volume is that, despite explicit intentions to take on board the way in which space is both medium and outcome of human practice (Bill Bevan, Jeremy Taylor), a tendency emerges in many of these papers to equate spatial relationships with social relationships, especially the phenomena of enclosure and social boundedness. This is to ignore the fact that social identity is constructed through the process (Jenkins 1995) of inhabitation of space. Several of the authors attempt to capture this through the detailed discussion of the material and architectural patterning of sites (Jane Downes, Jeremy Taylor, Adam Gwilt), but occasionally they miss the disarticulation between the residues of the work of life (even if these involve
'deliberate deposition', repeated associations between people and things) and our attempts to make sense of them. What we must focus on is not the pattern *per se*, but its construction. We need to make more than token reference to the reproduction of social relations through the labour of these lives. Another current theme in the volume is that of the 'everyday'; concern is given to the processes of life -- agriculture, craftwork and food production -- by Dee de Roche, Ann Woodward and especially Andrew Fitzpatrick. It would be good to see this focus on calendrical organisation developed into written archaeologies of routine which might inform our knowledge of particular landscapes. An equal emphasis upon consumption, as well as production, could also pick up on themes currently being explored in anthropology and sociology (Miller 1995).

One of the other themes emerging from this volume is a focus upon embodiment. Tilley's recent exploration of phenomenology has been both welcomed and criticised in the academic community, but what it has done is to draw archaeologists into the recent use of the body as a focus for sociological enquiry (Tilley 1993; Shilling 1993; Turner 1988). Space has begun to be explored from a corporeal framework, as experienced through movement and perception. However, in a rush of sensorial embodiment, it has often been forgotten that the construction and discourse surrounding the body itself is as different and diverse, and historically composed, as the communities themselves (Shilling 1993; Moore 1994). J.D. Hill's article takes on corporeality explicitly in the later Iron Age/Roman transition, by looking at the increase in material culture designed to dress, groom and adorn the body, including the 'fibula event horizon' and the increased use in toilet instruments (pp. 96-107). Although many writers have stressed how the body has been used as symbol, metaphor, analogy and forum in the discourse of past communities (as in the face on the hilt of the Grimston sword, hung in the newly opened Hull Museum), Hill argues that the scale at which this permeated many levels of society in the early Roman period was unprecedented. However, discussion that rests at this level can sometimes produce disembodied bodies -- prettified, decorated, but static, unfleshed. What is missing from accounts of embodied selves in later prehistory is a sense of the social encounters within which these changes in the discourse of 'cleanliness' and 'facial presentation' took effect. Embodiment, as Hill so rightly points out, is necessarily habitual; discourses of the body need to take shape within the wider working *habitus* and consumptive practices of which they were a part.

My main disappointment with the volume is the lack of imagery accompanying the articles. As both line drawings and (a) photo are included, restrictions in cost and format were obviously not preventative factors. The one photo is of a broch silhouetted against the skyline, an image familiar from student textbooks and slideshows. Only Fitzpatrick (pp. 73-86) uses reconstructions: the 'traditional'
southern British roundhouse we know so well from Butser and Pimperne and a set of vessels from Glastonbury Lake Village -- empty, of course, as 'found'. There are graphs and finds illustrations, plans at site and landscape level, but none of them are illustrated from the position of the body. Apart from the reconstruction drawing, people are absent both from illustrations and (in some papers, perhaps) from the text. There are thus few illustrations which do more than illustrate. Image, as much as text, should be part of our repertoire as authors for interpreting and imagining the inhabitation of places and the readings that are made from them. These comments seem minor when set against the enormous value of such a volume and refer not so much to the book itself but to future directions which might be taken. Indeed, the 1997 Iron Age Seminar at Cardiff this autumn illustrated that themes of ancestry and identity may well nudge the discipline in new directions.

Finally, it is interesting to compare this book with those currently being published on the Neolithic and Bronze Age (Thomas' *Time, Culture and Identity* (1996) or Bradley's *Signing the Land* (1997)), often lavish and expensive hardbacks which are the result of a (male) academic's hard work. Iron Age archaeologists are often criticised for 'borrowing' theoretical ideas from earlier prehistorians such as Thomas, Tilley and Barrett, but at least this volume demonstrates their skill in publishing up-to-date summaries of current thinking and practice on this scale. However, we could ask why Iron Age archaeologists don't write the sort of 'overview' texts that Thomas, Tilley, Barrett and Bradley regularly produce. Perhaps this corner of prehistory, more than any other, has been so critical of the dominance of particular individuals in the interpretation of the Iron Age (namely -- if perhaps unfairly -- Barry Cunliffe) that they are now reluctant to engage in such practice themselves. Within this trend then, a rich assemblage of different scales of analysis and interpretation is what we have come to expect of recent Iron Age collections (Morris and Fitzpatrick 1994; Champion and Collis 1996; Hill and Cumberpatch 1995); in terms of the volume of material and the authors presented, *Reconstructing Iron Age Societies* exemplifies this approach.

This review may seem unnecessarily critical but it is the role of the reviewer to generate discussion from a text rather than merely describe it. Of all of the volumes recently published on the Iron Age, this appears to be the most comprehensive account of work by the leading researchers and workers in the field. However, if we are to really 'reconstruct' Iron Age societies, we must have a critical engagement with them that wrestles with both our own position as interpreters of that past and the past inhabitation of those remains (Barrett, forthcoming).

References.


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