
By R. Sites

Sharples presents a pointed overview of the later prehistory of Wessex, not hesitating to acknowledge gaps or simply lazy thinking in the ways we regard various aspects of Iron Age community. While largely an updated version of previous works, the volume presents a coherent and concise discussion of the state of archaeological knowledge of later prehistoric Wessex. Building upon each previous chapter, Sharples provides a comprehensive approach to understanding how Wessex society was formed and informed from the Bronze to the Iron Age. The easily accessible discourse moves from an in-depth discussion of the landscape, to the formation of community set within the landscape, and then to the component parts of that society via analysis of the house and the individual. The final chapter pulls all the pieces together, presenting a contextual synopsis of social relations over time in Wessex.

The discussion of landscape is a comprehensive treatment of an admittedly diverse and often segregated area of study. The geology and environment of the varied landscape of Wessex is laid out clearly and accessibly, with a general overview doing more than paying lip service to areas outside the author’s predominant focus. This section contains more than simply collation and reiteration of the physical setting of the region, however, with a smoothly understated discussion of the implications thereof on and by the inhabitants. Most significantly, he calls attention to the situation of settlement, and therefore people, within the landscape, focusing on visibility and the differences between the oft-discussed enclosure versus hillfort.

The following presentation of the formation of community in Wessex is a largely straightforward discussion of the evolution of thought regarding changes at the end of the Bronze Age and into the Iron Age. Sharples discusses and argues for and against particular views of social change, incorporating recent thought and evidence to showcase the modifications in the way we treat, or should treat, the shifts in technology, social organization, and production in Wessex, but with acknowledgement of the likelihood of interregional associations. While he touches on the necessity of investigating the changes in architecture and placement in the landscape, he instead focuses on the labour necessary for creating those structures. No doubt the organization of labour and the ability to provide for labourers was a significant factor underlying the changes in social organization, but this section largely ignores the impact of the changes of the architecture itself. The following chapter includes a discussion of the change in size over time of the Wessex roundhouses, however, it largely focuses on the house in regard to cosmology and the more symbolic aspect of both the house itself (lifecycle) and internal structure rather than how those changes might fit in to changing social strategies. The rather formulaic approach is somewhat of a let-down given recent studies on domestic architecture moving past cosmology as the sole social characteristic of the house, yet
Sharples presents a clear progression of the role of the house in Wessex over time that highlights the significance of domestic architecture and the necessity of application of a social lens.

*Social Relations in Later Prehistory* is a valid, vibrant text for scholars, students, and the interested public. It condenses a millennium of social change and shifting relations to a readable, thought-provoking narrative. Rather than pretend to address southern Britain as a whole, while in actuality using Wessex as a basis, the work is unapologetically devoted to the examination of a complex topic within a region with an incredibly rich archaeological record. Sharples presents a tightly woven description of the shifts in and between Wessex communities over the first millennium BC, with plausible causality and an understanding that social relationships are informed by more than simply people.