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Book Reviews

IS THERE A BRITISH CHALCOLITHIC? PEOPLE, PLACE AND POLITY IN THE LATE 3RD MILLENNIUM. Edited by Michael J. Allen, Julie Gardiner and Alison Sheridan. Pp. xxviii and 340 + CD ROM., Illus 127. Oxbow Books, 2012. Price: £39.95. ISBN 978 184217 496 8.

This substantial volume represents the proceedings of a conference held in Bournemouth during 2008, jointly organized by the Prehistoric Society and Bournemouth University. The volume consists of twenty chapters arranged in five sections, and it poses an intentionally complex question: is there a British Chalcolithic? If you expect a straightforward answer to this question you will be disappointed. The chapters explore the social changes of the second half of the third millennium BC to consider whether, as is the case in some European countries, a separate epoch would assist the study of the period. Some chapters argue persuasively for a British Chalcolithic whilst others reject the concept. After reading the first chapter, this reviewer was convinced by the persuasive argument, only to be off-footed by subsequent chapters which called for a reappraisal of earlier assumptions. For some, defining a Chalcolithic gives us a way of resolving the terminological difficulties that derive from adherence to the Three Age System (e.g. Stuart Needham) while others question the advisability of adopting a new period to an already flawed Three Age System (e.g. Ben Roberts and Catherine Friedman).

The beginning of the proposed period is marked by the first dated introduction of metalwork and ends by the first dated use of tin-bronze. The extent to which the presence of metalwork, particularly copper, is considered sufficient to require a separate chronological period features centrally within many of the papers (e.g. Stuart Needham; Alison Sheridan; Ben Roberts and Catherine Friedman; Steve Burrow). For many contributors, metalwork is crucial for defining the Chalcolithic, for others it is a hindrance. Rather than focusing upon metalwork, a number of contributors suggest that the period is most clearly marked by the occurrence of crouched inhumation burials accompanied by beakers (e.g. Frances Healy; Harry Fokkens). In fact, the end of the period (between *c*. 2200 and 2100 cal. BC) is marked not only by the adoption of bronze, but also the declining use of beakers, the appearance of food vessels and collared urns, and the construction of barrows and cairns. This shift, which sees the emergence of distinctive barrow cemeteries, is argued by Neil Carlin and Joanna Brück to mark the most significant ideological change within the third millennium BC.

Whether this period is as distinctive as assumed is a recurrent theme within the volume (e.g. Stuart Needham; Ben Roberts and Catherine Friedman). Are we being blinded by the emergence of the new technology of metalworking at the expense of the continuity

seen in other elements of the period? For Alison Sheridan, the new technology of metalworking is suggestive of movements of people and ideas from Continental Europe, whilst others see the period as one of social continuity, demonstrated in the reuse of Neolithic monuments and ceremonial complexes (Paul Garwood; Neil Curtis and Neil Wilken; Steve Burrow; William O'Brien; Neil Carlin and Joanna Brück).

In summary, this is one of the most stimulating volumes on British prehistory to have been published for a considerable time. The arguments presented are constructive and substantial, and whilst in many cases the conclusions drawn within individual chapters conflict with one another, this ensures an engaging and thought-provoking read. Whilst it is clear that valuable insights can be gained by dipping into this volume to read selected chapters, the true strength is only apparent when read as a whole.

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