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‘Awesome’ must be one of the most over-used words in the English language, but for once its use is wholly appropriate to describe the achievement of Roger Mercer and Frances Healy, along with their small army of leading specialists, in publishing this huge Neolithic monument complex and its surrounding landscape. In around 800 pages they have summarised the results of Mercer’s twelve seasons of excavation (1974–86), of previous investigations, of field surveys in 1959, 1974–86 and 1996, and of post-excavation, some of it undertaken in the recent past and taking advantage of methods and approaches undreamt of when the excavations were taking place. These include Richard Evershed et al.’s application of organic chemistry techniques to determine vessel use from absorbed lipids (Chapter 7.3) and Alex Bayliss’ et al.’s implementation, in 1997–9, of a rigorous programme of radiocarbon dating, followed by the use of Bayesian modelling to define and refine the chronology of activities on the Hill (Chapter 4). Therefore, despite the length of the publication’s gestation period – 23 years since the last season of excavation – the project has benefited immensely by the application of state-of-the-art analyses and from the experience, new information and insights gained during the interval.

The Neolithic earthwork complex at Hambledon Hill, extending over an imposing and irregularly-shaped hilltop on the north-western scarp of the Wessex chalk in Dorset, comprises a series of earthworks, the earliest of which (Chapter 4) appear to be one or possibly two long barrows; a causewayed enclosure; and a cross-dyke. The subsequent and complex structural history, which included the addition of a further enclosure, other cross-dykes and various outworks, is summarised in Table 4.4 (p. 407). The excavations undertaken by Mercer took place because it was realised that the site was being seriously damaged by ploughing and by other earthmoving activities, including the scandalous bulldozing of a long barrow in the 1960s. Funding for the 1974–86 excavations, for a major post-excavation programme from 1995, and for the present publication, was provided by English Heritage (and its predecessor bodies), while the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments of England (RCHME) funded the 1996 field survey, as it had previously funded Desmond Bonney’s survey in 1959. The excavations were legendary for their scale, complexity and military-style organisation, as befitted such a large undertaking; the reviewer can claim direct experience of this, having been a fresh-faced volunteer in the mid-1970s who, with myriad fellow ‘grunts’, trudged up the hill each morning under the watchful eye of the supervisors.

The publication – split into two volumes because of its size – sets out to provide a definitive account of the archaeological work on Hambledon Hill and its environs. In Volume 1, an introductory chapter places the Hill in its geographical, topographical, geological, geomorphological and archaeological context, outlining previous archaeological work on the Hill, setting out the history and rationale of Mercer’s project and offering a graphic chronological summary of Neolithic structural developments (p. 13). Chapters 2 and 3 describe the field surveys and Mercer’s excavations; Chapter 4 presents the radiocarbon dating evidence and its interpretation. Volume 2 contains specialist reports on the palaeoenvironmental history (based on molluscan and sedimentary evidence, Chapter 5); on charcoal and charred plant remains (Chapter 6); on human remains and diet (Chapter 7); on the faunal remains (Chapter 8); on ceramics (Chapter 9) and on lithics (Chapter 10), while Chapter 11 offers conclusions about Hambledon Hill, placing it in its local
landscape and chronological context and in the context of other causewayed enclosures. Chapter 11.6 reviews the success with which the research aims have been achieved and sets an agenda for future work.

It is worth outlining the research aims – as formulated when the major post-exavation project from 1995 was established – as these indicate the nature of what was being asked of the Hill, and govern the way in which the results have been presented. As set out on p. 12 and slightly abridged here, these are:

1. What were the complete form and extent of the earthworks?
2. What was the chronology of its construction and use?
3. How did its components articulate in function and layout?
4. How was the complex built and what were the implications for contemporary resources, demography and social organisation?
5. What were the genesis and nature of the numerous deposits of largely disarticulated human bone?
6. How could the collection of artefacts and food remains from the site be best interpreted to create a picture of the socio-economic base of the period?
7. What was the local context of the complex, in terms of contemporary settlement and of human impact on the natural environment?
8. What were the subsequent human uses of the complex? Was Everley Water Meadow, in the Iwerne valley below the hill, a Bronze Age metalworking site? (Note that the publication mentions, but does not deal in detail, with the Iron Age hillfort except where Neolithic features had been found or suspected within its ambit.)

The answers to these questions have been set out in exemplary, textbook fashion: findings are enumerated systematically, fully, and with an attention to clarity that means that future researchers should be able to find the most detailed pieces of information with ease. Factual information is separated from interpretation, and the relationship between the two is clearly stated. Similarly, the evolution of thinking about the monument, and about ways to approach its survey and excavation, is presented clearly and fascinatingly (Chapters 1–3). Illustrations are numerous and well-conceived, and there is an invaluable index. This is a triumph of the systematic approach espoused by Mercer, Healy and the experts who have provided the specialist reports. Frances Healy must be singled out for special praise for managing the collation of an eye-watering amount of documentation.

There are so many exciting results to come from this publication that it would take too much space to enumerate them here. Suffice it to note that the long-recognised presence of imported material, including the pots made from the gabbroic clay of the Lizard peninsula in south-west Cornwall which lies some 240 or so kilometres to the south-west, also includes evidence that may identify the containers in which they were transported, in the form of a charred fragment of Cornish heath (p. 590). The famous grape pip (Figure 6.4) is interpreted as evidence that vines had been among the domesticated plants previously introduced to Britain. Evershed et al.’s lipid analysis has confirmed here, as in other British Early Neolithic pottery assemblages, that cattle were being used for their secondary products (here, milk) as well as for their meat. And the re-evaluation of the human remains evidence has scotched the previous interpretation of the ‘man shot dead by arrow while holding a child’ hypothesis. In terms of the site’s dating, Bayesian modelling of the 158 radiocarbon dates from the Hill has shown that construction began between 3690 and 3640 cal BC and that the Early/Middle Neolithic use of the Hill lasted between 310 and 370 years (Table 4.2).

The various authors have also been able to address broader issues of interpretation, and in particular the validity or otherwise of various claims made by post-processualists such as Tilley. It will come as no surprise to read that many of these claims are roundly refuted, with the specialists setting out their evidence to substantiate their alternative interpretations.

Many will find this a ‘traditional’ excavation report, but that is not a criticism. It provides a wealth of information and insights that will be used, in many ways, for decades to come. To this reviewer, the only shortcomings in what Mercer et al. have produced are that there is not a fuller discussion of the Early Neolithic ancestors of the people who built and used Hambledon Hill. The users of Hambledon Hill were clearly not immigrants themselves – the South-Western style of pottery clearly represents an insular development from what, in the reviewer’s opinion, had been a tradition introduced from across the Channel – but all too little is known about these hypothetical immigrant ancestors. Another shortcoming is the absence of a more comprehensive ‘executive summary’ of the chronological development of the complex, and of the results of the specialist research, at the beginning of the publication.
Review

The one major criticism of the publication is directed not at the authors, but at English Heritage, for the way in which the process of publishing this landmark publication has been handled. While the fieldwork and survey work must have cost around £1 million in today’s money – offering staggeringly good value for money – the actual publication is a mean-spirited affair. Rather than produce a conventional volume, English Heritage have chosen to make the Hambledon Hill report available on a ‘print on demand’ basis, for the cost of £100. The result comes as two limp-bound (not hard-bound) volumes, printed on poor quality paper which ruins the quality of the superb aerial photographs. Furthermore, insufficient attention has been paid to the quality of line illustration reproduction: scanning has degraded many of these. There has been an over-long delay between submission of the final text and appearance of the publication; and, most shockingly of all, it appears not to be actively marketed! There has been no launch, and it took some time to appear on the English Heritage online shop. (It is now available at http://www.english-heritageshop.org.uk/mall/productpage.cfm/EnglishHeritage/_51319_123217/Hambledon%20Hill%20Dorset%20England). What on earth is going on? Surely such a landmark publication, of a site of such seminal importance for European prehistory, deserves better treatment from English Heritage, who, after having supported the project throughout, manage to fall at the last hurdle.

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