

**Harding, D.W. 2004. The Iron Age in northern Britain. Celts and Romans, natives and invaders. – London/New York, Routledge**

Book review by E.A.G. Ball



In this thorough study Harding presents an interesting overview of and a synthesis on the Iron Age of northern Britain. According to the author this part of Britain has been subject to relative neglect by professional archaeologists of the Iron Age until recent years. As such a general synthesis did not yet exist.

In the introduction Harding shows us that the chronological boundaries for the Iron Age in northern Britain are difficult to define. Contrary to the south, where the Roman occupation forms a clear *terminus ante quem* for the period, the Iron Age in the north has seen no structural break from the mid-first millennium BC, when knowledge of iron technology was most likely present, up to the Norse settlement in the later first century AD. Consequently the book covers a time period of over one and a half millennium, broadly divided in the earlier Iron Age, the Roman Interlude for northern England and southern Scotland, and the later Iron Age. Equally difficult to define are the geographical boundaries of the study area. The territory assigned to the Brigantes in documentary sources is essential. This region, as well as the surrounding area and the areas to the north of it are the focus of the study.

In 'The nature of the archaeological evidence' (chapter 1) the author explains that archaeology of northern Britain has been a site-dominated one. Classification and interpretation of the available evidence has mainly been based on field monuments. Settlement sites seem to be plentiful, although the evidence mostly relates to those types that are clearly discernable from the surface. Funerary complexes are rare, the Arras cemeteries being the most famous. Problems related to differential survival of artefacts described by the author are prolific in other areas as well. The a-ceramic nature of the Iron Age in parts of northern Britain (as in Ireland), however, is as intriguing as it is problematic.

In the chapters 2-10 Harding discusses the available archaeological data concerning the earlier-, the Roman- and the later Iron Age in different meaningful regions. In doing so the author discusses individual settlements, settlement patterns, funerary evidence, sites of a different nature, material assemblages and more. Also particular consideration has been given to the archaeological visibility of changes in social expression through time, as seen for instance in the decline of the monumentality of buildings in the 'Atlantic Iron Age' and the increase of specific artefact types in Argyll and Scotland. According to Harding this could well reflect changing patterns in the expression of social identity from fixed and communal monuments to portable and personal artefacts.

For the Roman Iron Age, the impact of Romanisation on the native populations in the various regions of northern Britain is discussed. The distribution patterns of villas and related settlements and military forts show us that Romanisation had different levels of impact in different areas of northern England.

In the frontier zone the process of Romanisation would have been repressed. Here the network of military forts and depots in the hinterlands would have entailed the confiscation of native land, the displacement of local communities and restriction upon native mobility. This signifies that traditional social structure of the societies here must have been subject to significant disintegration. In this area a degree of hostility would have existed towards the Roman military. Harding argues that the urban infrastructure necessary to provide a framework of

local administration and economic integration in which the former native elite and entrepreneurs could prosper did not develop here, contrary to southern England. Beyond the Roman frontier the traditional social structure would not have been fractured by subjugation within the empire.

For the post-Roman era Harding considers amongst others native settlement, Anglian settlement and expansion, 'Roman' and 'Celtic monastic' Christianity, the Picts and the 'Pictish problem' and the Scots using both archaeological and historical sources.

The last part of Harding's study constitutes an excellent review and conclusion. The discussion of the available evidence through a thematic approach ensures a well-structured synthesis in which topics as the enclosure of settlements, the division of space within settlements, social structure, Romanisation and the historical identification of groups as the Brigantes, Scots and Picts and their relative invisibility in archaeology are reviewed. The book ends with a characterisation of the northern British Iron Age placing it within the context of Atlantic, Continental and Mediterranean Europe. The author argues that northern Britain can by no means be regarded as peripheral to the mainstream of central and western Europe; this part of Britain and atlantic Europe were in another mainstream altogether.

The Iron Age of Northern Britain' is a well-written book that presents both a critical review of the existing data and publications on the topic and a relevant theoretical debate. It is illustrated with outstanding aerial photographs of sites often taken by the author himself. The lack of maps depicting mentioned sites and geographical zones, however, is a disadvantage for those readers who do not have a thorough knowledge of the area under study.

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