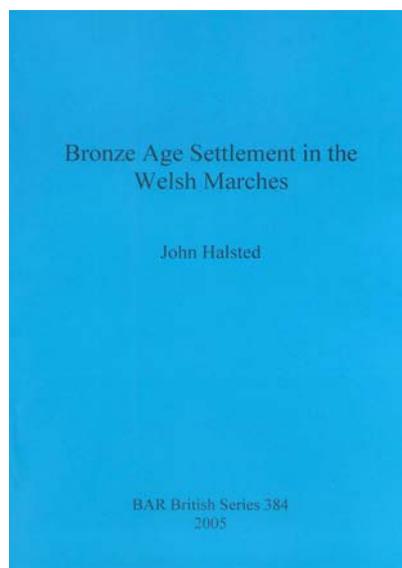


Halsted, J. 2005. Bronze Age Settlements in the Welsh Marshes. – Oxford, Archaeopress (BAR British Series 384)

Book review by P.F.B. Jongste



Introduction

In precisely 100 pages (including an appendix with calibrated radiocarbon dates as oxcall-graphics), Halsted deals with settlements during the Bronze Age in a region that rightfully deserves closer attention: the Welsh Marshes. The publication is composed of an introduction with major themes related to the Bronze Age in the British Isles (chapter 1), a short outline of the physical environment of the area (chapter 2), three chapters on the Early, Middle and Late Bronze Age in this region (chapter 3-5) and the conclusions (chapter 6). The study does not contain a complete description of all known sites as the main objective is to look at settlement patterns and dynamics on a broad scale. It is therefore that the number of figures (only 22) is rather limited and mostly concerned with the distribution of archaeological sites and finds plotted on the geomorphological, geological or altitude maps of the different research areas. Also, very simple bar charts are depicted showing the numbers of metal objects during the three Bronze Age periods, as well as some overviews of radiocarbon dates.

The bar charts sometimes consume much space (*e.g.* figure 17 and 18). A minor, but annoying problem with some figures is that the text is not filled out properly (figure 2 and 20). The author may consider leaving out the lines in figure 20 and using an outline or box for the toponymes instead (*cf.* figure 6) or using numbers that are explained in a box below. For the sake of uniformity a north arrow should have been used in figure 3, 9, 16, 21 and if possible north arrows should be in the left top corner for cartographic reasons. There has been much freedom of choice in that respect.

As such, this study is about locations, findspots, numbers and dates spatially distributed over the landscape. The lack of full descriptions of the archaeological finds themselves is solved with an extensive list of publications that is used to build up the database necessary for this study. It will no doubt attract mostly readers interested in spatial analysis and regional studies on Bronze Age settlement archaeology. There is nothing wrong with that, of course, but one may ask the question whether the broader picture reflects that of the individual sites. The reader is left with the idea that well documented settlement sites in the region that represent the necessary feedback on the story behind the plotted dots are absent. Of course, some sites are described in the text, but illustrations of site structures and layout, albeit in a simplified way, are absent, sadly to say.

From a continental point of view the study is rather limited to archaeology of the British Isles, but when reading the book, I noticed that apart from clear differences in houses and settlements between Britain and the continent, there are also some striking similarities. As in the British Isles for instance, our knowledge of settlements of the Late Neolithic, Early and the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age (2500-1500 BC) on the continent is scarce. Only in some regions (Denmark, Germany) we get a glimpse of what settlements in this period looked like. This is not to say we lack any indications of occupation during this period, on the contrary. Besides barrows, hoards and single finds, we regularly encounter concentrations of settlement debris or (clusters of) pits full of cultural material. We just are not sure what the houses and house sites looked like. Whether we are looking at the remains of a different residential mobility or whether we should consider irregular house plans

is still much debated. The difference is that unlike Southern England and for instance The Netherlands, Scandinavia and Germany, the change in settlement patterns in the Welsh Marshes did not occur during the Middle Bronze Age, but much later during the Late Bronze Age.

Landscape (Chapter 2)

The Welsh region is dominated by the Welsh upland massif and is characterised by river valleys connected to the English border counties to the east. Most of the landscape has been covered with glacial deposits supporting poorly drained soils, thus complicating effective cultivation in the past and the need of active drainage. The climate during the Bronze Age in this region is thought to have been cooling down, making conditions for settlement and exploitation even worse. Fore more, wood clearances and agriculture in some areas have led to the formation of heath lands.

Settlement periods (Chapter 3-5)

Elsewhere in the British Isles, as on the Continent, the settlement evidence of the Early Bronze Age is scarce and rather elusive. Sometimes, all we have are concentrations of debris and occasionally a hearth pit producing an Early Bronze Age date. Later on, during the Middle and Late Bronze Age we know of enclosed and nucleated settlements in for instance southern England and that may well determine the way we expect Early Bronze Age settlements to look like. That people actually lived in the region is confirmed by the large numbers of barrows from this period. Explanations of why our evidence for settlements from the Early Bronze Age is scarce tend to focus on the higher mobility of the Early Bronze Age people and the settlement debris left at, among others, barrow sites is considered to be the relicts of seasonal occupation in the area, possibly coinciding with sowing and cropping of the arable fields. During the rest of the year, people would have wandered through the area hunting for game, collecting fruits and nuts and tending their herds. The locations where one could presuppose human occupation during these periods are used by Halsted as nodes of domestic settlement. Only three settlements date to the Early Bronze Age and are situated in the northern part of the region (area of Cheshire) and the rivers and other water sources may have determined the choice of location. Hilltop sites seem to have been used during this period as well, although their later use as hillforts has truncated the nature of the settlements. The three settlement sites in Cheshire are surrounded by barrows and copper mines. Also the distribution of metal and flint artefacts seem to have relationships with the locations of barrows and settlements, although the distances do not support that either settlements, barrows or depositions were focal points. Their distribution seems to have been determined by the physical environment (streams and rivers, location of arable land etc), reflecting some degree of residential mobility during this period.

As said, the Middle Bronze Age witnesses a shift towards nucleated settlements in southern England. In the Welsh region, however, this is not the case. Again the number of settlement sites is low (N=3) and again somewhat concentrated in the northern part of the area. There is some evidence for enclosures around the settlements, but most of them are not excavated and dated. Dates from pre-hilltop enclosures could allow for Middle Bronze Age activity, albeit stretching the calibrated intervals to the earlier extremities, but as the cultural artefacts associated with these sites are dated much later, it seems unlikely that they were used in this period. The overall image is that there seems to be a continuation of occupation from the Early Bronze Age well into the Middle Bronze Age. Again, the large numbers of metal artefacts deposited mostly in wet context is shared with what we see in the Early Bronze Age. The location of burial sites in the Middle Bronze Age is hampered by the lack of Middle Bronze Age burials in the research area. Continuation of exploitation and settlement dynamics seem to be reflected by the dating and locations of burnt mount. These were used throughout the Early and Middle Bronze Age and are located at some distance of the settlements in areas where one would expect transhumance. This continuation of settlement patterns and residential mobility raises the question why from Late Bronze Age onwards a major shift in settlement layout, pattern and residential mobility took place. The construction of nucleated and defended hilltops that came around in the Welsh region as well as elsewhere in the British Isles is seen by Halsted as an indication of social and economic instability. In comparison to the rest of the British Isles, the Welsh Marshes even show a high density of hillforts and they now are found in the whole of the research area (N=16). The number of settlement sites remains rather low (N=4): two are found in the north and two in the south of the region. As they lack evidence for enclosures, it appears that besides the introduction of hillforts as focal point of political power and prestige, on the level of rural settlements there is continuity. The impact of the hillforts can be seen in the distribution of metalwork in hoards, mostly weapons that are to be found on these enclosed political centres.

So, what have we got? The Welsh Marshes has been an area filled with people during the Bronze Age, but their remains are dominated by metal work depositions in wet contexts during the length of the period. During the Late Bronze Age the hillforts come into view, whereas the 'normal' settlement sites remain the same

during the entire length of the Bronze Age: undefended and closely linked to the physical environments and soil conditions suitable for arable cultivation. The reason for the low number of settlements in all three Bronze Age periods is that not many of them are recorded, let alone excavated in full. The scarcity of the evidence, specifically for the earlier periods, is used to infer that the settlement patterns and residential mobility of the social groups within the region did not change during the second millennium BC. Only around 1000 BC a major shift occurred with the appearance of the defended hillforts. This all means, that when in southern England, for instance, the residential mobility came to a halt and nucleated and defended settlements were built, people in the Welsh Marshes continued with the exploitation of their surroundings on a seasonal basis.

Rightly so, Halsted states that we still lack much information on the exploitation during the earlier periods of for instance hilltop-sites and the evidence for Middle Bronze Age occupation, specifically of burial sites is very restricted. It also shows what information we lack to test his hypothesis. I come up with three areas Bronze Age research should focus upon in the near future in the Welsh Marsh area:

- On a site level more information about duration, phasing and the extends of the exploitation area around a settlement should give insight in the continuity and discontinuity of residence.
- The broader picture of the location of the arable land and the links with burial monuments, depositions of flint, metalwork and other materials for that matter is necessary to be able to link the domestic and ritual within the spatial framework of the physical environment. The limits of Halsted's study is that he can only calculate the distances between settlements, burial grounds and deposition areas, presupposing that the further away, the less likely that links are there. But then, we do not know whether or not long distances were of any importance during the Bronze Age, especially when we consider the degree of mobility. Try linking the dots, instead of explaining their location solely on the basis of the underlying landscape or the simple fact that they are clustered or dispersed.
- Finally, regional studies as these have their pitfalls. One is inclined to focus on similarities and differences between the regional and the national. However, that does not explain what happens for instance when during the Late Bronze Age hilltops are constructed in the Welsh Marshes, whereas nothing alike happened during the Middle Bronze Age. Can this be a case of conservative behaviour, the fact that the area is to be considered to be remote and isolated, or could it be that the social organisation was different? This synthetic level of thinking needs information from other, comparable regions within the British Isles and abroad. Also, it should use ethnographic sources of social groups, e.g. in Indonesia or New Guinea that live under comparable conditions and with comparable settlement patterns and residential mobility.

I think, however, that what Halsted has presented in this publication is the necessary first step to get grip on what happened during the Bronze Age in this region.

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