H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barry W. Cunliffe. *Wessex to Ad 1000 (A Regional History of England).* London: Longman, 1993. $77.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-49279-0; $39.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-49280-6.

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This book is one of the latest volumes in the Longman Regional History of England series. The series has a simple goal–to provide a two volume review of the archaeology, landscape, and social history of each geographical region in England. The first volume for each set covers from the Paleolithic to AD 1000; while the second covers from AD 1000 to the 1980s. Each volume has a separate author.

It needs to be noted that Wessex is defined as consisting of the present day counties of Avon, Berkshire, Dorset, Hampshire, Somerset and Wiltshire. As noted by the author, Wessex has no set geologic or cultural boundaries, and its boundaries vary between individuals. This is important to remember since archaeological phenomena do not always follow modern day boundaries. This area shows a prodigious uniformity during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, but in the Iron Age this region was split between the three distinct tribes known as the Atrebates, Dobunni and Durotriges.

A book covering the above mentioned topics for prehistoric and early historic Wessex is long overdue. The archaeology of Stonehenge and the Neolithic Early Bronze Age of Wessex has been extensively treated by others (Burgess 1980; Castledon 1987; Richards 1990), the only recent books to look at the whole of Wessex over several thousands of years are Crittal's (1973) Victoria County History volume on Wiltshire and J. F. S. Stone's (1958) WESSEX. Suffice to say, since these two books appeared there have been extensive excavations throughout Wessex and new interpretations of the archaeological record.

This book does provide a start in filling the gap. Cunliffe provides a well-written, organized review of the archaeology and early history of Wessex. A nice balance is struck in describing such well known sites as Bath, Silchester or Stonehenge, and incorporating the data from smaller sites such as Chalton and Winterbourne Stokes. Examination of the bibliography shows that site reports written up through 1991 were incorporated into this review. Exceedingly useful is an appendix listing the radiocarbon dates for sites in Wessex, in both calibrated and uncalibrated form.

Each chapter is laid out in similar fashion. There is an introductory section, a section explaining social and political developments, a description of the economy, material culture and settlement patterns. Interpretations of all this data occurs primarily at the end of each section and chapter. For the most part, Cunliffe's interpretations and approach to the archaeological record are rooted in the "New Archaeology" of the late 1960's and not tinged by the jargon-laden post-processualists.

Longman should be applauded for including the numerous maps, drawings and black and white photographs. The profuse aerial photographs give a sense of scale to the Neolithic monuments and the Iron Age hillforts; the rest of the illustrations provide an opportunity for the reader to see what is being described and discussed. Even the most bored student should find something to pique their interest.

One disservice Longman does do is by having only one author for this book. I do not mean this as an attack against Professor Barry Cunliffe. Professor Cunliffe is Professor of European Archaeology at Oxford University and is a very accomplished excavator of such sites as Bath and Danebury. His strength is with the Iron Age and Roman periods in Britain though. Wessex is an area with an extremely rich archaeological record, and in the hands of another writer, say Richard Bradley or Julian Richards, there would be more interpretation and synthesis and less dry description. One would hope that future volumes would utilize two or three authors to provide balance and depth.

There are some frustrating and troublesome points to the text of this book. First, the reader needs to realize that Cunliffe's interpretations are just that–they are not facts and they are not the only view on the subject. One example of this is his insistence that Mesolithic flints near early Neolithic sites are evidence of the Neolithic farmers

taking over the territory of the Mesolithic peoples (p. 39). Alternative interpretations can be that this evidence can represent peaceful contact between the two groups, or the gradual adoption of agriculture by Mesolithic peoples (Dennell 1985:169-189). Another example is with hoards dating to the Bronze Age. Cunliffe (p. 163) sees the hoards as being "propitiatory offerings to the deities of earth and water." While this interpretation has been offered before by other scholars, Cunliffe ignores recent research which views hoards in terms of competitive chiefdoms and in relation to the burial evidence.

This book is sorely lacking in uniform balance for the later time periods. Only a third of the book deals with Roman and Anglo-Saxon Wessex. The archaeology of Bath, Winchester, and Silchester, all major sites in these two time periods, is dealt with in the most cursory fashion. In these final chapters less emphasis is put on archaeology and more on the historical record. Historians may enjoy this, but the Early Medieval period is one which has a limited database and can benefit from utilizing archaeology.

In conclusion, this book does provide a useful *introduction* to the *prehistoric archaeology* of Wessex. The monuments and sites are well illustrated and accurately described. The radiocarbon tables in the back of the book are extremely useful. Anyone reading this book needs to realize though that Cunliffe's interpretations of the archaeological data are quite limited and there are several other authors that they should also be reading.

For the Early Medieval and Roman periods this book fails miserably. It lacks direction in whether it is an archaeological description or a historical description of Wessex.

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