

## REVIEWS

Brian Hope-Taylor, *Yeaving: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria*, London, HMSO, 1977, 392 pp., 111 pls., 123 figs. (ISBN 011 670552 3).

THIS BOOK is a survival of a rare species—an archaeological report which is readable and exciting from beginning to end. It is probably the last of its kind we shall ever see. There are few excavators whose skill with trowel and brush is matched by sensitivity with pencil and camera; there are even fewer who combine these attributes with a fluent pen. Where that combination still exists it is now doomed, weighed down by the vogue for jargon-ridden “new” archaeology and reeling from the deadening hand of current concerns for the levels and economics of publication. We should be thankful then that what may prove to be the last literate archaeological report is concerned with a Northumbrian site—and one which magnificently repaid the meticulous, subtle dissection it received.

The royal complex which Bede called *Adgefrin* lies on a glacial “whaleback” alongside the River Glen beneath Yeaving Bell. A stone memorial on the road between Akeld and Kirknewton now marks the field where Dr. Hope-Taylor’s excavations in the 1950s set technical standards which were to inspire a whole generation of field archaeologists. The work was carried out in conditions of appalling difficulty: the trenches and post-holes of the timber buildings often only appeared vestigially and fleetingly as areas of pale yellowish-grey against a subsoil of pale greyish-yellow; the field could only be excavated between September and February and then only with a minimum of unskilled labour; and all the time the wind blew down Glendale—dumping over 40 tons of sand on part of the site during one storm. It is against this background that we must judge the sensitive photographs and the astonishing detail of the plans and sections.

The heart of the work lies in chapter 3: the excavated structures. There is, of course, a significant pre-historic and Roman iron-age archaeology both on the “whaleback” and on the Bell above, but for most readers the unique interest of Yeaving begins with the first of its five post-Roman phases. By this stage the riverine site already had the status of a folk-centre for burial and other “ritual” activities. These activities were represented archaeologically by the earliest version of the “Great Enclosure”, a wooden palisade which enclosed an earlier ring-ditch barrow and which forms the link between the site’s sub-Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon history. Outside the enclosure to the west were small wooden buildings with “native” pottery. Even further west, where the modern quarry now lies, a stone circle (with its attendant cremations) was replaced by a wooden rectangle housing inhumations. The second phase was marked by the introduction of elements which are recognisably Anglo-Saxon: a sunken-feature building with Anglo-Saxon pottery and other structures with Frisian

affinities. It is this phase which saw the building of a pagan temple (and associated halls) which now acted as the focus for burials. It is at this stage also in the site's development that the great wooden assembly structure makes its appearance—a sophisticated grandstand which, in its final form, was capable of holding over 300 people. In the third phase there were a series of progressively more elaborate developments on the site. There was a sequence of two main halls (each *c.* 80 feet long), the grandstand was enlarged and the Great Enclosure was rebuilt on a substantial scale. Smaller halls scatter the site whilst the pagan temple was encased in another structure. This impressive collection of buildings and enclosures was finally destroyed by fire. Many of the structures were rebuilt in the fourth phase and new halls were added but the Great Enclosure, which had been a feature of the site since (probably) the late Roman period, was not rebuilt; its site was partly covered by a wooden church set in its own fenced graveyard—the fence significantly incorporating that same ring-ditch which had lain within the Enclosure. Another disastrous fire then took its toll but, whilst there was a subsequent rebuilding, the halls of this fifth phase were erected in a less impressive form and the assembly stand was not replaced. The church gained an annexe but the town was now clearly in its dying stages, its functions largely taken over (as we know from Bede) by the nearby site of Milfield.

The dating of this sequence cannot be certain. But it seems reasonable to equate the advent of the church in phase 4 with Oswald's accession in 634. The great period of the site, in the latter part of phase 3, can plausibly be attributed to Edwin's reign (617–33). This was Yeavinger as St. Paulinus saw it when he baptised thousands in the waters of the river Glen—at one end of the site he would have seen a pagan temple with ox-heads piled against its walls, he would have wandered through a series of halls aligned on various emblematic posts and he would have dined in a hall whose foundations plunged over eight feet beneath the surface, having stepped over a threshold that concealed the burial of a symbolic watchman. The final phase reaches from Oswald through the last half of the seventh century and its dating is partially given by a Merovingian coin and Bede's account.

Clearly the earlier phases are difficult to date but the important point is that, throughout the history of post-Roman Yeavinger, the dominant influence is not that of the settling Anglo-Saxons but of the native Celtic community. The position of the site, the continued respect for its cult centres, the physical appearance of its population and many of the building techniques—all point to a significant continuity and a powerful indigenous contribution. And it may well be through the British world that the undoubted *romanitas* of the assembly stand reached Glendale. The marks of the Anglo-Saxon settler are much less noticeable.

This analysis leads Dr. Hope-Taylor to wider issues and to a fundamental reassessment of the development of the kingdom of Bernicia: he argues that the area developed a distinct political and religious identity within the Romano-British period and its aftermath, distinct from the Votadini of Lothian. In this nascent Bernicia Christianity made little headway—here are no Christian inscriptions or long-cist cemeteries. Its Celtic leadership early and peacefully gave way to a Germanic aristocracy (perhaps developing from naval forces guarding the coast between Forth

and Tyne). The centre of power gradually shifted eastwards to Bamburgh and the coast but the central zone remained, like much of Bernicia, a Celtic world, though now with rulers whose names were Anglo-Saxon.

The case is made with caution and conviction, buttressed by a critical analysis of the archaeology of Yeavering and other sites. Twenty years ago it would have been revolutionary; now it is much easier to accept. And this brings us to the main problem of the book. Its writing and publication have their own complex stratification where documented dates are not always a reliable guide. It emerged in 1979, though the HMSO copyright claims 1977 (with a deleted 1975 alongside). Dr. Hope-Taylor's preface is dated 1969. The result of this delay is that some of the text beats on doors which are now open, not least because of the effects of Hope-Taylor's own teachings. At other points he could not take advantage of the comparanda which were available in the late 1970s. Much of Mr. Jobey's work on lowland settlements was not published, nor were the results of the recent revolution in place-name study. Mr. Miket had not begun work at Thirlings and Dr. Harding's excavations at Milfield had not then revealed a sister site for Yeavering in its close association of pre-historic structures and Anglo-Saxon burials. In many cases these later discoveries have only served to support the arguments advanced by Dr. Hope-Taylor but it must nevertheless be frustrating for all concerned that the results of his work at Doon Hill and Bamburgh could only be incorporated as footnotes—particularly since the Dunbar excavation seems to clinch his case for the British origin of Yeavering's palisade technique.

Nevertheless the record of what was found is not diminished by the date of its publication. Chapters 2–4, with their superb drawings, will be a mine for future scholars in a great variety of disciplines. Think of the implications of the geometry and modular planning revealed by the site. Consider the evidence for oxen and pagandom in the temple. What was the relationship between the plan of the wooden church at Yeavering and the early stone buildings of Northumbria? Where do we find the analogue for those emblematic wooden posts? A dozen other questions rise immediately from the core of this book. As an excavation and as a record Dr. Hope-Taylor's *Yeavering* is a work of rare quality.

RICHARD N. BAILEY

### BOOKS RECEIVED

*NORTH-EAST ENGLAND People at work 1860–1950* by Frank Atkinson, Moorland Publishing, 1980.

Frank Atkinson needs no introduction to readers of *Archaeologia Aeliana*. This book consists of reproductions of 140 interesting photographs of bygone industries in

Northumberland and Durham and on Tyne and Wear. Each section is opened with an account of the industry and each photograph has a full informative legend.

*ROMAN SCOTLAND A guide to the visible remains* by David J. Breeze. Frank Graham 1979. £1.20

In 61 pages Dr. Breeze gives a pithy and up-to-date account of the contact between Rome and the area we now know as Scotland followed by a gazetteer of the visible Roman remains, all very relevant to the study of the Tyne–Solway Roman frontier.

### CORRECTION TO VOLUME VII (1979)

#### *Editors Note*

Some errors crept into the reproduction of Mr. Cambridge's plan of Hexham Abbey on page 158 of the last volume of *Archaeologia Aeliana* (AA<sup>5</sup>, VII) and it is accordingly reproduced again on the opposite page. It may be added that the reference on p. 163, line 6 of the same volume to "fig. 1, p. 146" should refer to the plan on the page opposite.