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BOOK REVIEWS, 2005

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Paul Frodsham *et al.*, *Archaeology in Northumberland National Park* [CBA Research Report No. 136. Council for British Archaeology, 2004] pp 38. 248 pls, 7 figs, tables. ISBN 1 902771 38 9. Paperback £19.95

During the 1980's the Northumberland National Park Authority began to recognise the importance of the historic landscape and this resulted in the development of strategies directed towards its preservation, exploration and promotion. It is greatly to their credit that they firmly grasped their responsibilities with regard to heritage management and they have since won well-deserved accolades on account of their expertise. Few other English institutions approach the Northumberland National Parks in terms of their breadth of engagement in all aspects of the past and in the myriad ways they communicate it successfully to an interested public; and this new publication represents yet another significant marker of their enlightened attitude towards the past.

This book has its origin in a one-day conference that took place at Morpeth in October 2000, when a number of archaeologists presented a series of papers on a selection of the work that had been sponsored by the National Park in the course of the preceding decade. However, it is more than a simple record of that particular event, as much additional material is presented in this volume.

Unusually, the book is divided into two parts. The first section [Part I: pp.1–152], which has been written by Paul Frodsham, the National Park Archaeologist, describes the history of man's interaction with the landscape within the bounds of the Park from *c.* 8000 BC to 2000 AD; while the second section [Part II: pp.153–366], provides a showcase for various

authors to outline the fruits of their recent research.

As Frodsham makes clear in his introduction, the book is firmly directed at the general reader. It provides a synthesis of past research, but also highlights potential lines of future enquiry. His choice of a continuous historical narrative for the framework of Part I is apt, as it is one that best accommodates the variable quality of the material available; while the need at times to sustain this narrative by an appeal to information from a wider geographical context is a gentle reminder that the Park is a modern construct – a small picture-frame that has been placed over a far larger canvas.

Though the edifice of supposition is at times carried dizzyingly beyond that which the foundations can bear [*vide* the passage on sustaining elites, p.33], Frodsham's fluidity in encompassing a wide range of optional interpretations not only offers the reader choices in interpretation, but also conveys the honest message that much still remains uncertain.

As one would expect, there are interesting references to many sites and monuments that are unlikely to be familiar to the general reader, but there are also others to better known elements, such as the petroglyphs for which Northumberland is justly famous. Although their interpretation remains as contentious as ever, it seems a pity that so little space is devoted to the psychological aspect – that the images may have been generated by adventures within inner space, rather than within the dimensions of the everyday world. Moreover, although it may seem pedantic, the use of the term 'Rock Art' is neither neutral nor instructive.

The attentive reader is also likely to be fascinated by how academic fashions can turn full-circle, with explanations derived from social anthropology being used not only to provide a context for the archaeology, but also to bind the narrative of the early prehistory, in a way

that would have been wholly recognisable to Frodsham's nineteenth-century predecessors.

Sometimes, he does suggest that matters are clearer than they are, as with the proposition that the tri-radial cairns, 'represent a previously unrecognised form of Bronze Age ritual monument' (p. 29 and *vide* p. 173). However, it is easy to take issue with individual statements; and this section of the volume is a brave performance that will be widely welcomed by its intended readership.

The second part of the book comprises fourteen papers by acknowledged experts, whose studies within the National Park range from the earliest times to the present day. Some of these results have already been published more fully elsewhere; and it is pleasing to have the assurance that fuller accounts of the others will do so at some point in the future. As Frodsham readily admits in his short introduction to this section, their subject matter is not evenly distributed across time and space and they cannot focus upon every topic of potential interest; but in the light of their calibre, it is very encouraging to learn that the Park intends to develop a detailed research framework to guide further projects of a similar kind over the next twenty years.

Yet each of the individual summaries that are presented here is well chosen to reflect the range of the work that has been sponsored in the immediate past. In addition, they also have the merit of providing the general reader with an absorbing insight into the wide variety of questions that scientists, archaeologists and historians seek to ask of the past.

The topics include a critical discussion of the evidence presently available for the reconstruction of past environments within the National Park (Robert Young), reports on large-scale relic landscapes and the excavation of certain elements within them (Paul Frodsham and Clive Waddington on The Breamish Valley Project; Peter Topping on Wether Hill; Beryl Charlton on the Otterburn Training Area); the results of the analytical survey of the earthworks at Westhill, Kirknewton (Alistair Oswald); a summary of the research at the Roman fort of High Rochester (Jim Crow);

overviews of continuing projects within the corridor of Hadrian's Wall (Tony Wilmott on recent evidence relating to the pre-Roman and Roman horizons; and Tim Gates on the results of aerial photography); outlines on the history and evolution of two mediaeval castles (Jim Crow on Harbottle Castle; Alan Rushworth and Richard Carlton on Thirlwall Castle); a review of the towers and bastles that are such a distinctive component of this landscape; (Peter Ryder; Richard Carlton and Alan Rushworth on Low Cleughs); an appraisal of the development of extractive industries, transport and the water supply (Iain Hedley); and an overview of the archaeological succession upon the Simonside Hills (Iain Hedley and Jamie Quartermaine).

While it would be invidious to draw attention to the papers that have proved to be of particular interest to the reviewers, the strength of a book such as this is that there is bound to be something to excite the curiosity of anyone. Indeed, not the least attractive facet of its design is that it is easy to start reading at random, allowing a passage to draw one into a subject upon which one's knowledge can best be described as fragile. One's pleasure in the upland landscapes of Northumberland can only be enriched; and not the least testimony to this book's value is the fact that it kindles a desire to stride forth and see the sites for oneself.

After an absence from Northumbrian archaeology of some 16 years, it is interesting for one of the reviewers to note what a younger generation regards as important from the contributions of their predecessors. On the one hand there is the heartening interest in the antiquarian endeavours of such figures as George Tate and David Dixon, which extends well beyond the mere results of their work to a consideration of their overall contribution to an understanding of the region's archaeology; while on the other, the absence of references to (for example) the seminal contributions of David Kirby on early Northumbrian chronology, or Peter Hunter Blair on such questions as the boundary between Bernicia and Deira, suggest that their efforts have been overlooked.

The editorial decision in Part I to keep references to a minimum, while acknowledging original research, requires comment as there is an element of inconsistency (p. 5). For example, the statement 'Why Gefrin ... should have been abandoned ... remains a mystery (Frodsham 1999)' on p.71 is not in any way illuminated by resort to the reference. If this was an isolated example it would pass unremarked; but it is not. Contrast this with those instances where true gems are left unsupported, such as the original sources of petitions for relief (pp. 87–8) and the several quotations relating to the depredations of the sixteenth century (pp. 98–100). By contrast, some of the authors of the individual papers in Part II would seem not to have followed this parsimonious stricture.

The text is handsomely illustrated with maps, plans and diagrams; but also includes a well-chosen array of colour and half-tone photographs. The latter include many fine aerial views by Tim Gates, whose work in recording the landscape must surely constitute one of the most important contributions to Northumberland's archaeology that has been made by a single individual over the last twenty five years. In addition, many of the captions provide further information as a supplement to the main text.

Despite some caveats then, the general reader is very well served by this highly approachable and compelling study, which ought to find its way on to the bookshelf of anyone possessed of an interest in Northumberland's past.

Roger Miket and Adam Welfare

R. J. A. Wilson and I. D. Caruana (eds), *Romans on the Solway: Essays in Honour of Richard Bellhouse*, Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society Extra Series Volume 31 (Kendal, CWAAS, 2004), pp. 231; many ill. ISBN 1 873124 39 2. Price: £20

This handsomely produced book is dedicated to Richard Bellhouse, an amiable and industrious pioneer without whom our knowledge of the Cumberland Coast frontier would be

incomparably poorer. The work is a companion to the well-received series of essays *Roman Maryport and its setting*, produced in memory of M. G. Jarrett in 1997. Any archaeologist concerned with the northern frontiers of the Roman empire will want to have both volumes at his fingertips.

Obviously the present book ranges more widely than its companion. Much of the work of any would-be reviewer is done by one of the editors, R. J. A. Wilson, who, with characteristic clarity tries to pull it all together into an introductory critical summary. He has his work cut out, for the subjects are diverse. Three chapters provide straightforward information: Clare analyses the ancient coastal environment and sea level. The clearest record to date of what may be seen on the ground of the fort at Ravenglass is presented by Blood and Pearson. Shotter draws together the coin evidence from the Cumberland Coast.

The work of the late Professor Barri Jones, whose claims of ditches and palisades on the Solway and the 'Western Stanegate' have got themselves fairly embedded in synthetic literature on Roman frontiers, has a pretty hard time here. His own report on Tower 2b is printed, but elsewhere, in Wilson's introduction and in an essay by Caruana, the idea, championed by Jones, of timber predecessors to the stone towers, is effectively discredited. Some alignments of demarcation ditch and frontier track or road observed by Jones remain possibilities, but much now dissolves, like the 'palisade slots' at Silloth, shown by Woolliscroft to be modern field drains. In the same Chapter 9 a 'Stanegate' period frontier of ditch and fences at Fingland Rigg (3 km south of Drumburgh) is still claimed, but there is no dating evidence and no convincing support for a Roman military (as opposed to, say, Iron Age agricultural) nature is offered. In this part of Cumbria native Iron Age boundary ditches and enclosures have a long history of being claimed as Roman military installations.

Breeze offers an overview of research on the structures of the Solway frontier which will be of permanent value, offering, as it does, a bibliographical schedule of the individual sites

which updates and supplements that provided by Bellhouse himself in 1989. Holder, with commanding grasp of evidence old and new, looks at the evidence of the place-names of the Cumberland Coast and the western part of Hadrian's Wall, laying to rest at least one foolish suggestion from the past (by the present reviewer). Holder produces a schedule of suggested identifications of known sites and ancient names which has a real algebraic beauty and which is likely to be definitive.

There are two major archaeological reports. Alan Biggins and David Taylor, who have recently revolutionised our knowledge of the form of the military *vici* (civilian settlements attached to forts) on the northern frontier, offer the details of one of their latest and most spectacular geophysical surveys, that of the fort and *vicus* at Maryport. These surveys work best as indicators of the overall size and shape of *vici*. Lacking the calibration of even partial excavation the detail is much more difficult to understand. Biggins and Taylor make a brave stab at interpretation, and Wilson has much to contribute, but we are all on *terra incognita*. The strip buildings along the road out of the *porta principalis dextra* appear to have long enclosed areas behind them, like medieval burgage plots. The commentators have obviously seen these ditched enclosures, but don't quite know what to make of them; it is not clear whether they think this is a field system of different date to the visible buildings. To me it seems inescapable that they go with the *vicus*. Could the multiple black splodges within these enclosures, behind the buildings, represent the wells that are ubiquitous in the back areas of military *vici* on the Continent, and probably (if only we had the excavation evidence) in Britain? It is notable that the single well in the *principia* of the fort at Maryport leaves exactly the same geophysical mark. Biggins and Taylor themselves draw attention to the intriguing possibility that some of the big stone buildings closest to the east gate of the fort may be granaries. This hints at a coastal supply-base function of the kind attested at South Shields, but without the granaries being crammed into the fort defences, as they were at the eastern

coastal site. Identification of these seemingly buttressed buildings by excavation must be a very high priority.

The recording of the steadily eroding cemetery at Beckfoot, reported by Caruana, provides a wealth of information on a topic even more obscurely understood than the *vici*. This detailed record of selfless rescue work carried out over many years will form an indispensable foundation when, as we hear it will be soon, the excavation of the surviving remainder of the cemetery is carried out. This chapter both records the basic information and embarks on a well-informed discussion of the significance of the various burials at Beckfoot. No certain inhumations have been recognised: cremation was still practised in the Beckfoot cemetery in the fourth century, at a time when inhumation is usually supposed to have become normal. Particularly notable, and as far as I know exceptional, are two cremations in Huntcliff-type vessels of the late fourth century. On this basis the view is put forward by Caruana (with acknowledgment to Andrew Fitzpatrick) that cremation continued, even in the fourth century, to predominate over inhumation as a 'northern military' tradition distinct from that of the province as a whole. I find this difficult to accept, at least on the limited sample of evidence presently available. The basic problem is that there have been so few excavations in northern military cemeteries that we do not really know how representative the few observations that have been made are. In a cemetery eroding out of a cliff, such as Beckfoot, it is naturally much easier to see cremation urns than cuts for graves, where unburnt bone will not survive because of acidic conditions and where, as we might expect for the fourth century, there would be a move away from the general use of grave goods. Caruana concedes that graves have been found, at South Shields, Carlisle, High Rochester and elsewhere, but goes so far as to suggest that many of these may have contained cremated remains. But at South Shields there were ghostly traces of coffins and the bodies they had once contained to confirm that these had been real inhumations. The whole picture is very

complicated, because not only are late-Roman inhumations without surviving bones or grave goods archaeologically less visible than cremations, but there may have been instances where cemetery activity shifted to another site in the late-Roman period, as towns grew or contracted and military *vici* were (in some cases) abandoned. Only two (those mentioned above) of over fifty depositions at Beckfoot certainly date to the period after the late-third/early-fourth century. They show that this cemetery was still in use but are surely not wholly representative of fourth-century burial practice. We should expect more inhumations to be brought to light with the application of careful area-excavation to the Beckfoot cemetery, and, eventually, other cemeteries of the military zone.

Thanks to this publication, its companion volume, and the works of Richard Bellhouse, the Cumberland Coast is now one of the best

documented frontiers of the Roman empire. The editors, contributors, and Bellhouse himself are all to be warmly congratulated for what will be passed on to future generations. The volume closes with a compelling essay by Stephen Harbottle, which attempts to reconstruct the life of one of the earliest pioneers of research on the Cumberland Coast, Joseph Robinson of Maryport. Robinson's fieldwork career was concentrated into two immensely productive years (1879–81). Clever and assertive, he was an able bank manager and amateur archaeologist but naïve or negligent enough to be ruined in a financial scandal. His fall, combined with his unusually intense interest in the past, suggests that he may have been something of a dreamer. Perhaps you should find out whether your financial adviser carries out archaeological excavations in his or her spare time.

Nick Hodgson

