



Frances Lynch and the prehistory of Wales and the West

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When I was appointed to a university teaching post, I was unprepared for the job. I had a degree in law but none in archaeology and was learning many subjects as I lectured about them for the first time. To help me through my first term I bought half a dozen recent books. One of them was *Megalithic Enquiries*. That was how I became aware of the work of Frances Lynch.

She wrote two of the chapters in this important collection, one on the classification of megalithic tombs in North Wales, and the other on the artefacts associated with these sites. From the beginning those two strands have run through her work. She has a special interest in the character of prehistoric monuments, and she has done much to analyse ancient artefacts in Wales. In fact she has ranged far more widely, for she has written a general account of megalithic tombs in Britain and has published her own report on one of the excavations at the Irish monument of Newgrange. Similarly, her studies of material culture have extended across both Britain and Ireland. They cover almost every period from prehistory to the Middle Ages.

Even with that qualification, those chapters in *Megalithic Enquiries* introduce two of Frances's particular concerns, and she has followed those strands consistently throughout her career. She has brought a new clarity to studies of such subjects as Neolithic pottery and megalithic art, and has also analysed portable objects like worked flints and polishing stones. She followed her initial study of Welsh megalithic tombs with two important excavations of her own, both of which have done much to clarify the chronology and structural development of these monuments. Her work at Carreg Samson and Din Dryfol has helped to establish new ways of looking at chambered tombs. The latter site was published in a co-authored monograph together with Christopher Smith's work at Trefignath: one of the monuments whose surface remains Frances had discussed in *Megalithic Enquiries* nearly twenty years before.

Her interest in monumental architecture has also led her to make significant contributions to Bronze Age studies. There were important projects at a series of individual monuments in Wales—round cairns, round barrows, ring cairns and a kerb circle (the definitions of these types owe much to her research). All these excavations were published promptly and in full, and her reports are among the relatively few accounts of recently investigated monuments that can match the achievement of Sir Cyril Fox half a century before. Among the most significant projects were Frances's investigations at Bedd Branwen, Moel Goedog and Cefn Caer Euni. The reports on these projects are notable for the quality of the documentation and the breadth of the discussion. Still more important was her work at the Brenig. Here she and her collaborators undertook what must be one of the finest and most detailed excavations of a Bronze Age cemetery anywhere in the British Isles. The monograph contains a perceptive analysis of each of the individual monuments in relation to those in other regions. The project also revealed important evidence of Bronze Age settlement and land use; even today it is a rare occurrence. The book is remarkable for the quality of the observations made in the field, their careful presentation in words, drawings and photographs, and the subtlety with which

they are interpreted. If archaeology can achieve the paradox of bringing a cemetery to life, that is what happens here. It is not too much to describe the book as a classic. It is only unfortunate that its appearance was delayed by other contributors after her parts of the text had been finished.

Of course, the Brenig report also benefitted from Frances's interest in material culture, which is by no means limited to the Neolithic artefacts she studied in *Megalithic Enquiries*. The first edition of *Prehistoric Anglesey*, published only one year later, already includes an important discussion of Bronze Age pottery and metalwork, and these interests have been expressed throughout her subsequent writings. Of particular significance is her contribution to the co-authored book *Prehistoric Wales*. She has also published articles on Beaker and Early Bronze Age pottery and stone implements.

Some of this work was undertaken together with colleagues. On several occasions she has taken responsibility for the publication of fieldwork carried out by other people. They include two round barrows in Wales, at Pant y Dulaith and Llong, but equally important is the report on two round barrows on Launceston Down in Dorset. This project gave her the opportunity to discuss a pair of well-preserved burial mounds in Early Bronze Age Wessex, and the final report is often quoted as one of the key texts on the mortuary rituals of this period.

Like many of her papers, this report was co-authored. So was the publication of Llandegai which had been awaited for many years. Its appearance did not disappoint the reader, for it not only provided up to date documentation of an important field project, it transformed the interpretation of that monument complex. To some extent that was due to the development of new methods of dating since the excavation took place, but more important was Frances's ability to integrate the findings of the project with the results of recent research on Neolithic and Bronze Age archaeology. Although the excavation took place many years ago, the report is very much a product of its own time, and that is why its appearance was so welcome. It did justice to a pioneering field project, but it was not a historical document. Characteristically, the paper went well beyond the basic task of describing what was found and contains a valuable assessment of why the monuments at Llandegai are important for studies of prehistoric Wales and the archaeology of the Irish Sea.

That is because of another aspect of Frances Lynch's work: her remarkable capacity for synthesis. It was evident from the beginning and characterises her excavation reports as well as more discursive articles on such topics as the interpretation of Welsh ring cairns, the distinctive character of kerb cairns and the connections between Bronze Age artefacts and monuments on both sides of the Irish Sea. She was also an editor of two valuable collections of essays which drew together the results of other people's research. Both the volumes were festschrifts, one of them dedicated to Lily Chitty and the other to Colin Burgess. Now it is her turn to be honoured in the same way.

Her flair for synthesising large bodies of information is equally evident from her other books. Here the two editions of *Prehistoric Anglesey* stand out, together with *Prehistoric Wales* which she wrote with Stephen Aldhouse-Green and Jeffrey Davies.

Prehistoric Anglesey was Frances's first book and was followed by a second edition twenty-one years later. The relationship between the two versions says much about her approach to archaeology. The publishers wished to reissue it as it stood, but she insisted in prefacing each of the existing chapters with a new passage explaining how the subject had developed over the intervening years. She also added a substantial section to the original publication, bringing her account up to date and discussing ways in which the evidence could now be interpreted. That was an unusual procedure in a subject where important books are usually reprinted without significant revision, as if they are sacred texts whose contents can never be altered. A comparison between the two editions of *Prehistoric Anglesey* reveals an author whose ideas are changing in new and interesting ways. It also illustrates a concern for the reader and the wider scholarly community which is all too uncommon.

Exactly the same applies to *Prehistoric Wales*. It is a mature reflection on many years of research, and at no point does the text lapse into dogma. It is wide ranging, accessible and well documented. Although Frances will probably recoil at the compliment, it shows a writer who is at ease with the more durable aspects of archaeological theory.

I make this observation because she would probably align her work with a traditional approach to prehistory. To the extent that her ideas are firmly grounded in her knowledge of the archaeological record that is certainly true, but to say this overlooks a whole area of her scholarly output. From the beginning Frances has written imaginative and intriguing articles which are impossible to classify. They grow out of an awareness of some of the dimensions that are missing from standard accounts of the past. The first of these papers dates from very early in her career. Its title is deceptive: 'The use of the passage in certain passage graves as a means of communication rather than access'. This gives little away, for the basic thesis is that the famous roof-box at Newgrange and structures of similar type may have been used as oracles: an interpretation that could easily be presented at the conference of the Theoretical Archaeology Group today. The same year (1973) saw another paper that might have been written in Cambridge in the 1990s. This article considered 'the impact of the landscape on prehistoric man' and was one of the first to consider the relationship between natural landforms and the monuments built during prehistory. It grew out of her direct experience of working in the field and lacked a complex theoretical apparatus, but it is none the worse for that. I heard the original conference paper and still remember how shocking it seemed to the audience at the time. Similar ideas recur throughout her work, often as details in her excavation reports, but one more example must be mentioned here. This is her contribution to the festschrift for Aubrey Burl. It considered the role of colour in the prehistoric architecture of the British Isles. It was a new idea at the time, but again it raised a question that remains topical today.

It has been four decades since I first read Frances's work and added it to my undergraduate reading lists. What strikes me now is the consistency of her output and her commitment to a number of important themes. I identified some of these at the start of this contribution. In closing, I have to add that these have been themes with variations, for her work has never stood still. Her ideas have changed as archaeology itself has changed. They have maintained a consistent standard through to the present day because her research has a capacity to renew itself as she moves from one project to another. That is something that all of us should applaud and emulate.