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**Joshua Pollard (ed.), *Prehistoric Britain*.
Blackwell Publishing, 6 June 2008. Pp 367. £19.99.
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From the title of this book one might assume that it is a general overview of prehistoric Britain, perhaps in a similar style to Pryor's 2004 *Britain B.C.* A glance of the contents page soon shows that this is not the case. Rather than a period based approach it instead cherry picks some of the more popular thematic issues currently concerning prehistoric British studies and attempts to address them very much from a theoretical perspective.

A set of themes, recognisable to anyone who has dipped a speculative toe into British prehistory during the last decade, can quickly be discerned from the chapters within the book even if one has skipped Pollard's thought provoking introduction. The debate concerning the nature of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition is covered early on with Julian Thomas and Rick Schulting summarising some of their recent works, and coming at the thorny issue of the speed of transition to full agriculture from different perspectives. Schulting continues the theme of foodways into the Early Bronze Age where the torch is passed to Jacqui Mulville to continue the subject onto and through the Iron Age.

As one might expect, space and landscape is another prominent subject within the book. Vicky Cummings looks at the enduring spaces of monuments, taking very much a post-processual approach to review recent theories on how they embody the relationships within society and the landscape. To compliment Cummings' chapter on monumental places Joanna Bruck turns her attention to the uses and meanings of the house through prehistory, arguing that differentiation between the sacred and secular has damaged past understandings of these structures. Lesley McFadyen, on the other hand, looks at temporary spaces and takes the interesting step of considering how

recent approaches to the Mesolithic might be beneficially applied to the Neolithic, somewhat bucking the trend of applying Neolithic approaches to the Mesolithic.

In their contributions David Field and Robert Johnson both examine the subject of later prehistoric landscapes, with Field looking at the development of field systems and land divisions, and Johnson attempting to bring together monumental landscapes, as covered by Cummings, and agricultural landscapes, as covered by Field, to discover landscapes that were both lived in and lived through.

The subject of material culture is addressed in chapters by Anne Woodward, Chantal Conneller and Stuart Needham. Woodward charts the changes that have happened over the last few decades within ceramics research; she considers how pottery is now so much more than just a signifier of cultural identity. Conneller concentrates on lithics and, like McFadyen, suggests that approaches used in the Mesolithic might be successfully employed in later prehistory where lithics are often only recorded rather than interpreted as, say, monuments often are. Just as Cummings suggests that monuments are metaphors for networks of social relationships, so Conneller puts forward the same case for lithics: each tool echoing its place of making and the biography of owners that might have had possessed it. This is a theme further explored by Stuart Needham who weighs up different models of exchange and how they can be related to movement, regionality, identity and status.

The subject of how people treat the dead, often at the forefront of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age studies, is specifically targeted by only one chapter, that by Andrew Jones. That this subject, although touched on in several other chapters, receives comparatively minimal coverage as a subject within its own right perhaps is a testament to how Neolithic and Early Bronze Age studies have progressed in recent years. Jones uses the theme to examine time, memory, personhood and identity. Personhood and identity are also the subjects of the book's final chapter, this time in the Iron Age, where Melanie Giles reviews their previous study. This chapter very much parallels the

changes that have occurred in the study of the British Neolithic, often the forerunner in new theoretical approaches, and demonstrates how theory derived from post-processualism now dominates so much of British prehistory.

If there is any criticism of *Prehistoric Britain* it is that although it covers the subject from a variety of different evidential and theoretical angles, in chronological terms it does seem quite limited to later prehistory. Only one chapter, Paul Pettitt's work on recent developments in the understanding of the Upper Palaeolithic examines Britain before the last glaciation. Indeed, although touched on in a number of chapters the Mesolithic does not warrant a dedicated chapter either: surprising given the recent growth in interest in this period and the application of post-processual techniques to it. Where it is covered, for instance Thomas's chapter, it is sometimes only as a lead in to the main subject of that chapter.

That the book does not follow a period by period approach is probably one of its great strengths. As it becomes increasingly obvious that many of the traditional differentiations between periods within British prehistory are arbitrary at best, the thematic approach starts to make much more sense. As Barrett puts it, each new age uses the debris of the past to reconstruct its world, thus one cannot hope for a true understanding of a *period* unless one also recognises the foundations upon which that period was based (Barrett 2000: 66).

For the undergraduate student or keen amateur, who already has a general grounding in British prehistory, *Prehistoric Britain* offers an excellent outline of the major themes and approaches that will, no doubt, be the main theatres of debate over the next few years. Indeed, even for the more advanced specialist the bibliographies of each chapter are extremely useful in locating some of the most up-to-date works on the subject. Overall: a worthy addition to any bookshelf.

Bibliography

Barrett, J. C. 2000. 'A Thesis on Agency', in M. A. Dobres & J. Robb (eds.) *Agency in Archaeology*. London: Routledge. 61-68.

Pryor, F. 2004. *Britain B.C.* London: Harper Collins.

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