David Field and David McOmish, *Neolithic Horizons. Monuments and Changing Communities in the Wessex Landscape*

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The easy, conversational tone of this book belies its disciplined rigour. David Field and David McOmish wear their compendious knowledge lightly. The two authors have spent 20 years as archaeological investigators for the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments in England and, subsequently, English Heritage, the intimate experience of which enriches this comprehensive investigation into what they call the ritual and ceremonial complexes of prehistoric Wessex. The book's particular strength lies in the fact that though Stonehenge, Avebury and the region's lesser-known monuments are documented, it is the communities who built them that sit at the heart of the text. As the authors themselves write, their approach provides a different kind of narrative than is usual in traditional accounts. Instead of what they call the sometimes myopic detail found in primarily archaeological works, Field and McOmish have chosen to explore whole landscapes and the links between the peoples who inhabited and traversed them. But even as they weave place, space and material culture into a unified whole, the authors continuously reassess current thinking. The latest research from Durrington Walls is of course fully documented, but how useful it is that they give equal weight to the news emerging from what has at times been called the forgotten Vale of Pewsey, that tract of land between Avebury and Stonehenge. This has until recently been woefully under-excavated, but the new discoveries at Marden Henge, which nestles within the vale and is ten times bigger than Stonehenge, are mentioned a number of times.

Starting with the great flood of Doggerland, then moving to the "distinct horizon" in technological development evidenced by the enormous flint extraction pits cut into virgin topographies, Field and McOmish travel widely across their landscape of choice and, in fact, well beyond it. They also range through time, meaningfully weaving together the evolution of sedentism, farming and monument design. They do this by

not only covering the world-renowned sites of Wessex, but by placing equal emphasis on the earliest monuments in the region, the long barrows, the causeways and the cursus enclosures. These they describe as providing a “template of ‘use’” (p. 80) which established a presence that had profound effects for later generations. They amplify this carefully constructed history by creating a solid sense of context with scrupulously applied dating sequences, clearly situating their timeframe between 6000 to 4000 years ago. As an aside, Field and McOmish display an interesting subtlety when they advise that this is a period “referred to as the Neolithic” (p. 14), which gives a nod to the debate about what actually constitutes Neolithisation, without revealing their own position – or perhaps, more importantly, taking unnecessary time and space to discuss it. This is entirely proper, because Field and McOmish’s book, with its bibliography and footnotes but no index, is not a scholarly text but rather an in-depth digest of the most significant research into this region both from long past and recent years. As would be expected with publishing lead times, the most recent papers the authors reference are from 2014.

There is a quietly compelling authority exerted throughout this book. It bears on the authors’ deep appreciation and knowledge of the landscape that they have studied for over two decades. They talk of the waist-high grasses which grow on Salisbury Plain impeding access in the summer. They note how familiarity with the area’s undulating hills quickly reveals the warm spots that receive the Sun for longer, as well as the cold spots that remain shaded: conditions which would have applied to and shaped the life choices of those in prehistory. They feel privileged to have worked in what they describe as this remarkable landscape and, as they look out over it, tell of “often finding themselves standing in silent reveries, wondering about the past peoples who called this their home” (p. 149). This gives a depth and reach to their considerations.

For the skyscape archaeologist there is the occasional fleeting mention of compass directions, midwinter sunrises, lunar cycles, calendrical devices and celestial orientation. These are referred to without cavil and, though they emerge as asides, an appreciation of skyscape is evident because clear links are made between celestial events and cosmology (p. 47), monumentality and cosmological significance (p. 48), axial alignment and astronomical observation (p. 79), as well as the notation of deliberate alignment (p. 58) and orientation towards seasonal markers (p. 88). This is enough to reassure that one is at least in the presence of congenial acquaintances, if not out-and-out friends. Though this is by no means a book about people and their relationship to the sky, it is skyscape-aware, as well as being a highly accessible and authoritative digest of life as it was lived on a landscape that saw unmatched human development at a time of momentous transition.