

Houses of the dead? Edited by Alistair Barclay, David Field and Jim Leary, Oxford, Oxbow Books, Neolithic Studies Group Seminar Papers 17, 2020, xiv and 195 pp., Illus. 55, £40.00 (Paperback), ISBN:978 1 78925 410 5.

This volume represents the latest of the long-running and exceedingly helpful series of publications which have arisen from Neolithic Studies Group (NSG) meetings. The NSG, commendably streamlined for an academic body, is to be congratulated on the speed and thoroughness with which it gets a record of its seminars published. As the editors point out in their preface, there is a long tradition of regarding the European *Linearbandkeramic* longhouse as an 'ancestral influence' on the long barrows and cairns of the Irish and British Neolithic. However, over the past 20 years, the discovery of large numbers of apparently domestic structures in Ireland and parts of Britain have provided a much closer set of houses of the living to influence these postulated houses of the dead. The potential connections between these houses and cairns throws up fascinating avenues for exploration. Several papers in this volume provide wider synthetic reviews of regional sequences of transition.

Barrett and colleagues contrast the temples and hypogea of the Maltese Temple Period, seeing them both as having functioned as 'clubhouses', in one case for the living and in the other for the dead. Sheridan uses the Scottish Early Neolithic data to point out that exact architectural parallels between tombs and houses are rare. Instead, she suggests that a focus on how the dead were treated is a much more fruitful way to understand questions of prehistoric identity. Three of these regional review papers share a focus on the inevitable problem of thinking in two dimensions, given that most archaeological evidence only provides us with ground plans. Pyzel uses plans to provide a chronologically and geographically compelling case for a shift from houses with burials and settlement to non-megalithic long barrows in Southern Poland. Chambon, by contrast, discusses how, in northern and western France, the similar shapes of long barrows and houses may be obscuring more complex differences in practice, especially given the lack of chronological overlap. Loveday draws on ethnographic and architectural parallels to dissect the ground plans of long barrow timber structures. He concludes that wide spaced timber structures are much more likely to be mound edging rather than free-standing structures.

Inevitably, the underlying assumptions that we make in classifying houses and tombs also provide opportunities for deconstruction of that which we think we know. Whitefield suggests that imagined communities of Neolithic Ireland, influenced by the privileged position of rural settlement in the ideology of the early Irish Republic, have led to too many timber structures being interpreted as houses. Bickle, in her review of burial practice at LBK settlements, argues that the dead in this case, far from being ancestors, were actually an active and ongoing part of the way settlement was organised. In another contribution which is sceptical of the overarching model of tombs as houses of the dead, Whittle considers the diversity of funerary practice from long barrows and cairns demonstrates that local and contemporary points of reference are likely to have been most important.

The volume also contains several important papers which present new data. The first paper by the editors on the Cat's Brain long barrow reports the new discoveries at that site and uses them to raise pertinent questions about how we classify rectilinear features. Drury and colleagues present a large new dataset from survey on long barrows in Lincolnshire which allows a more representative understanding of the monuments than from the low number of completely excavated examples. Ray and Thomas describe different buildings at Dorstone Hill which in turn develop into different forms of long mounds. They interpret this as

evidence of different lineages coming together to create different versions of the shift from house to mound. Kenny, in her contribution, provides a specific example of direct connection between the evolving architecture of Trefignath chambered tomb and the house at Parc Cybi. House and tomb were connected in ongoing relationship as they both shared an alignment related to spring sunrise. By contrast, Smyth describes a different example of connections between an earlier house and a long mound at Ballyglass. Here there was no common alignment and it is likely that the ultimate form of the court tomb was related to the needs of the living rather than being a house for the dead.

Healy uses her final discussion chapter to make the point that the variety of ways that the earlier chapters find to evaluate the differences and connections between houses and tombs may be the result of underlying principles of communal labour, communal gatherings and indeed common technologies. More broadly, connections of form or practice between tombs and houses can be seen to be meaningful but were rarely formulaic. The strength of this volume lies in the way that these local, contingent histories are brought out so that the kind of principles to which Healy refers can be appreciated.