

account of "one of the most thrilling, colourful and romantic periods of English history" (publicity flier for Wright 1987). I am not clear what was so romantic about the Middle Ages, though perhaps it is felt that we should not tell the children about the oppression and exploitation of the feudal system at such a tender age. Doubtless it will be underneath the Christmas trees of quite a number of middle-class households this December.

One final point: as one steps out from the dimly lit halls into the bright foyer, one is thrown immediately into the thick of the exhibition shop, replete with Age

of Chivalry T-shirts, posters, guidebooks, related adventure games, and other such contemporary material culture. As we emerge from feudalism, so a new social and economic order takes its place, that of capitalism. Where can the Royal Academy go from here?

Matthew Johnson

References

- Pevsner, N. 1964. The Englishness of English Art. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
 Wright, S. 1987. The Age of Chivalry: English Society 1200-1400. London, Kingfisher.

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The Museum of An Iron Age

(A review of the Museum of The Iron Age, Andover, Hampshire).

The 'Museum of The Iron Age' in Andover represents a welcome departure in the presentation of prehistory to the public. For the first time a specific period is being fully treated in one building. This innovation is to be encouraged. The museum presents the results of Professor Barry Cunliffe's excavations on the Iron Age hillfort of Danebury, about 5 miles from Andover. It aims to "tell the story of the Iron Age" and so "to bring the story of prehistoric life in this part of Wessex to as wide an audience as possible".

This is definitely a post-Jorvik museum. Spread over two floors of a converted grammar school, the exhibition consists of displays covering topics such as "Warfare and Defence", "Housing", "Storage", "Farming" etc. Displays combine full scale models and impressionistic reconstructions of ramparts and a round house, pictures, artefacts in a wide variety of cases and wall mounted text.

There is perhaps too much text, and some could be replaced by audio-visual displays, especially as the museum seems largely used by school parties. Compared to most traditional displays this museum is an advance. Those casual visitors observed seem less museum shocked than normal, and reactions from teachers and children using the museum with one of the reviewers has been favourable (see Hill, this volume).

Despite obvious effort, the museum is still very much a traditional 'see and don't touch' experience. Artefacts remain behind glass, although the range of actual case shapes is quite varied. The physical experience is restricted to walking through a section cut through a complete timber fronted rampart (in a way the Iron Age builders could never have done), and a reconstruction of the inside of a round house.

The exhibition presents a single possible Iron Age, as a series of disconnected fragments -- warfare, houses, crafts etc., yet nowhere are visitors actually given an image of what an Iron Age hillfort

could have been like. A very small unexplained 'pepper's ghost' of the fort today and in the past is offered, but this is not emphasised and many visitors may miss it. What is lacking is a series of large-scale models of Danebury to set each display in its context.

The exhibit is organised as one long snaking corridor, the visitor being forced to follow a single circuitous route through the small subunits of the gallery. This is no doubt imposed by constraints of space, but means that the museum becomes very congested if large numbers are visiting. We are also concerned that access for disabled visitors does not seem to be well catered for. Can a wheel chair easily get around the ground floor? Is there a convenient lift to gain access to the upper floor?

The structure of the exhibition appears (consciously?) to follow Hawkes' ladder of inference. Defence, housing, natural resources at the beginning on the ground floor, the visitors having to go up stairs(!) to reach crafts, social organisation and finally religion. The most tangible and aesthetically pleasing features (the rampart, Celtic warrior, round house, storage pit etc.) are downstairs. As one climbs up through the ladder/exhibit the experience becomes increasingly traditional and remote. Objects are behind glass cases and not part of reconstructions as on the ground floor. We finally enter a dark, gloomy room covering ritual and burial (of course!). Yet the searing light of civilisation is at hand in the final part of the gallery, a slide projection of the advance of the Roman world over barbarian Europe.

At no point is it questioned that there is an assured and solid version of the past. The museum ignores the radically different images of the same period that exist and might also be presented.

According to this exhibition there is only one Iron Age that can be experienced. Nowhere is it explained how this seemingly solid image of the Iron Age was arrived at, except that these are the results of over 18 years of excavations. The past has been presented as a fait accompli.

The only references to the work of the archaeologist in the museum are a lengthy and boring wall text on what you can do with bones, and a single black and white photograph of kneeling female digger at the entrance. To her right stands a life-size model of a "Celtic" warrior in battledress. Behind him is a large caption, "The Celts are War Mad!", a quote from the classical writer Strabo but used without inverted commas. Throughout this exhibition the role of the archaeologist is reduced to being the provider of the illustrations in the margins of history. 'History' seemingly provides the real truth about the past and so does not even have to be put in inverted commas! Rather than using archaeology to question common stereotypes from history, the exhibition does the reverse and embodies them. So at the entrance the visitor is presented with an encapsulation of the romantic stereotype of the "Celtic Warrior". Similarly women are seemingly unimportant and are relegated to display number 12 near the end of the exhibition.

Throughout the museum archaeological finds are 'explained' by quotes from venerable Greek and Romans. This, it would seem, is the only way we can learn about the past: archaeology is reduced to kneeling at the feet of 'history'. These quotes even become headlines. The suitability of using classical, or Irish sources to describe English Early and Middle Iron Age Society can be seriously questioned, although this is nowhere mentioned. Nor is the image

questioned of this as a warlike time: the distant past is always assumed to be a violent one. Is this what the Iron Age was like? Should we really invoke the "Celts" in prehistory? Should archaeologists not think carefully first before invoking a racial stereotype?

The Iron Age presented is one in which our gender stereotypes prevail. Man is the warrior, he stands strong and tall at the beginning of the exhibit. The first clearly feminine form is another life-size model almost at the end. A woman dressed in rather drab attire is weaving at a loom. The real objects found at Danebury about weaving are presented in a case in front, so providing legitimisation in the physical evidence for the stereotyped model. Yet can you see a weaving comb? That is, if they are weaving combs at all...

The room also contains the description of the society which used Danebury. The display follows from domestic crafts through a discussion of trade to 'elite' objects such as horse fittings, brooches, glass beads. Finally there is a description of the 'typical' 'Celtic' Society with its near 'feudal' pyramidal separation of chieftains, nobility and farmers/slaves drawn from written

sources. At the beginning of the room women weave, at the end men rule!

This new museum is to be welcomed. It is certainly one of the better presentations of prehistory the writers have seen (at least in this country). We recommend that different people visit and assess it for themselves. But we would question the assumptions which lie behind this and other common presentations of the archaeological past. Too little attention is paid to the subjectivity of interpretation, and the possibilities of different views of the past. The methods and techniques of archaeology are all too rarely presented to the public. We would advocate a critical approach to display and presentation. This need not be a pluralistic nightmare of x different versions of the Iron Age displayed in one museum. Rather more emphasis is needed on how the past is made and a more critical use of evidence throughout, stressing that this is only an interpretation.

One final point: could the curator please remove the stuffed mouse from the reconstructed storage pit. Several children now think Danebury was a large pet shop!

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