

LYN BLACKMORE, IAN BLAIR, SUE HIRST AND CHRISTOPHER SCULL. 2019. *The Prittlewell princely burial: excavations at Priory Crescent, Southend-on-Sea, Essex, 2003*. MOLA Monograph 73. London: Museum of London Archaeology; 978-1-907586-50-7, hardback £35.

In 2003, archaeological mitigation in Prittlewell, Southend-on-Sea revealed an early medieval chamber grave, bedecked with feasting equipment, weaponry, exotic imports and personal objects, dating between the later sixth and early seventh centuries AD. The importance of the find is hard to overstate, given that it is the only undisturbed Anglo-Saxon grave of ‘princely’ calibre to have been excavated to modern standards, and the first excavated since Sutton Hoo Mound 1 in 1939. Thanks to a pair of miniature gold foil crosses, it is also potentially the earliest unambiguous example of Christian burial in England. Because of its significance, the grave has long since entered discussion and curricula, but based only on a booklet produced in the immediate aftermath of the find (MoLAS 2004). ‘Long-awaited’ is an overused epithet, but in this case it is apt.

We may have had a long wait for this publication, but the thoroughness of the analysis and the research behind it vindicates some of the delay, which was in fact mainly caused by lags in planning decisions following a public enquiry. As a technical excavation report, thoughtfully published alongside a more accessible guide (Hirst and Scull 2019), the contents broadly follow what would be expected, but the depth and breadth of analysis easily supersedes a typical work of the genre. This is all thanks to the knowledge and experience of the team of assembled specialists, thorough and overarching academic guidance and editing, and impressive professional oversight from MOLA. Needless to say, the book is very well presented indeed, replete with full colour illustrations and high quality photography.

While the first two chapters cover the necessary introductory material including a desktop survey, excavation strategy and site sequence, Chapter 3 presents and re-analyses earlier discoveries. A cemetery was known here from the late nineteenth century, and appeared to be typical of fifth- to seventh-century cemeteries. It had an abundance of sword graves to be sure, but nothing that could have predicted the opulence of the 2003 finds. This chapter presents a most welcome disambiguation and

chronological analysis of these earlier finds, though given the *c.*100m distance between most of these earlier excavations and the relatively small area excavated in 2003, the wider cemetery does not play a major part in what follows. The uncertain context of the chamber grave within or nearby a larger cemetery is probably the most substantial barrier to our current understanding, though it is inevitable given that the proposed development and therefore further archaeological mitigation did not go ahead. The relationship between the cemetery and the chamber grave is therefore preserved, but remains unexcavated.

Chapter 4 explains the structure of the oak chamber, the mound that covered it and the collapse of the latter into the former, preserving *in situ* much of the mortuary tableau. From a technical perspective, this is perhaps the most impressive part of the book, attesting as it does to laudable foresight in the early stages of excavation, the enviable skill of the excavators, and the unenviable task of post-excavation analysis, entailing complex stratigraphical analysis and soil micromorphology, as well as the piecing together of evidence from the residues and corrosion patterns of artefacts. The result is that the chamber and its contents can be reconstructed in astonishing detail, representing what is probably the most fine-grained taphonomic study of any grave of this period.

Chapter 5 contains detailed studies of the artefacts, and at 150 pages it is the most substantial portion of the book. The number of specialists involved and the extent to which parallels have been pursued occasionally makes the account as exhausting as it is exhaustive. However, it is important to recognise that while what has been assembled here may not be especially accessible, it represents an extremely rich resource that has utility and implications that easily exceed the Prittlewell grave. Investigation of the imported vessels, the unusual folding stool and the unique gold foil crosses take us far beyond Britain, and firmly situate this grave among its international contemporaries, an ambition likely shared by its deceased occupant.

Chapter 6 explains a detailed Bayesian chronological analysis, and represents the most crucial part of this research in terms of its wider significance, as it convincingly dates the burial between AD 575 and 605, and quite possibly at the earlier end of that range. The analysis is innovative and thoroughly scientific, and this remarkably early

date positions the grave among the first princely burials in England. It also, however, intimately associates these rare displays of extreme aggrandisement with the very earliest processes of Christianisation, probably predating the Augustinian mission of AD 597.

Chapters 7 and 8 explore the wider significance of the burial, situating it in its wider social, economic, ideological and ritual contexts, and finally focusing on the political context in the relationship between the kingdoms of the East Saxons and Kent. Again, these discussions are detailed and at times dense, but the research behind them is extensive, expert and enlightening. Together, these sections provide ideal platforms for revisiting what we thought we knew about southeast England at the close of the pre-Christian age, and demonstrate the undoubted impact the Prittlewell prince will have on our knowledge. The authors also nimbly and prudently avoid the temptation to link the buried individual with a known historical entity.

This volume marks a significant step forward in our understanding of this period, and will surely become an invaluable resource for future researchers. From the first breaking of turf through to publication, this book represents an exemplar for the holistic practical, scientific and academic process of archaeological investigation.

References

HIRST, SUE, AND CHRISTOPHER SCULL. 2019. *The Anglo-Saxon Princely Burial at Prittlewell, Southend-on-Sea*. London: MOLA.

MOLAS. 2004. *The Prittlewell Prince: The Discovery of a Rich Anglo-Saxon Burial*. London: Museum of London Archaeology Service.

TOBY MARTIN
Department for Continuing Education
University of Oxford
(Email: toby.martin@conted.ox.ac.uk)