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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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REVIEWS.

Radio Carbon Dating: Its Scope and Limitations by Harold Barker.
Antiquity. Vol. XXXII. No. 128. Dec. 1958. p.p. 253-263.

In this excellent paper, which should be read by all archaeologists, Mr. Barker of the British Museum, deals first with the ill-informed criticism which Miloycic published in Germania in 1957, and then goes on to deal with the scope and limitations of Radio-carbon dating in general. I can attempt no summary of the long article here, but would particularly call members attention to his section on statistical concepts. After listing 30 measurements of a particular sample, it was found that 68 per cent were within the limits of 1 standard deviation from the "true" value - in this case the mean, 15.5. If therefore this is written 15.6 ± 0.1 d.p.m. (disintegrations per minute) there is a 68 percent probability that the true activity lay between 15.5 and 15.7 d.p.m. 94.4 percent of the measurements lay within two standard deviations, and 99.7 percent within three standard deviations. i.e. it is fairly probable that the true value lies within one standard deviation, probable that it lies between two standard deviations, and highly probable that it lies between three standard deviations.

R. S.

Life and Death in the Bronze Age. by Sir Cyril Fox: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1959. English price £2. 5. 0.

Sir Mortimer Wheeler wrote "Cyril Fox has revealed and lit up the mumbo-jumbo of Bronze Age burial with the fires of an unrelenting imagination". Sir Cyril has been excavating barrows, largely in Wales, for the last forty years, and is a pioneer in their scientific excavation, as opposed to the looting which was a popular 19th century pastime of the English gentleman. In this book he has gathered together the results of his work from papers scattered throughout several journals, and the result is a very readable book, in which one can follow the development of his technique, as he grew in experience. Even early in his work, however, he was capable of such interpretation of the evidence as this "The conclusions drawn from these facts were that the dead man's home was on the north side of the site chosen for his burial; that he had been ceremonially borne by friends or kinsfolk up to, and into, the trench that those who carried him were not allowed to enter the consecrated area around the grave, but that the persons charged with

the performance of the burial rites were awaiting the bearers beyond the trench. The body was handed over, and these persons descended with it into the grave". As R.J.C. Atkinson says "The words, and the situation they describe, are simple enough. Yet they give a sense of immediacy, almost of presence as an eye-witness, which springs from a rare creative imagination," an imagination, I may add, adhering closely to the observed facts. The book is lavishly illustrated with line-drawings and photographs.

Incidentally, the number of Antiquity quoted above has an article by Stuart Piggott on the Excavation of the West Kennet Long Barrow: 1955 - 56.

R.S.

The Decipherment of Linear B. by John Chadwick,

Cambridge University Press. 1958. Reprinted 1959. English price 18/6d.

This is the most fascinating book I have read for years, a true-life detective story. When, four years before his tragic death in a motor accident, Michael Ventris made his famous broadcast in which he announced he had solved the problem of the "Linear B." script, John Chadwick was an eager, though sceptical listener. Many previous workers had claimed to have interpreted the script, but all had been wrong, although some students had made valuable contributions to the eventual solution. Soon, however, Chadwick was convinced that this time, the claim was correct, and from then on - he is Lecturer in classics at Cambridge University - he collaborated with Ventris in research on the remaining problems, and is carrying on the study. Chadwick's knowledge of archaic Greek was especially useful to Michael Ventris. Ventris himself was an architect, with a great flair for languages. Linear B script was first found in Crete, and Sir Arthur Evans considered it a "Minoan" language, which he said could not be Greek. Most people followed this opinion, and until a few months before he deciphered it, Ventris himself thought it was likely to be allied to Etruscan. It is a syllabic language, with ideograms used as determinatives, e.g. a pot will be drawn to make sure the reader knows that it is pots that are being listed. 87 Linear B. signs are tabulated at the end of the book. The language has not only been shown to be an archaic form of Greek, but numbers of the tablets containing it - they are mostly "accounts" and lists for royal households - have been found in mainland Greece. Chadwick begins with a brief biography of Ventris, and follows this with a description of the various "Minoan" and allied scripts, and all at-

tempts at their interpretation, and then, largely from the "Work Notes" of Ventris, shows how the solution was found to Linear B.

At first, many scholars, besides Chadwick working on the problem, were unconvinced that Ventris was right, but almost all now agree on the correctness of his solution. The arguments against are reviewed, and answered by Chadwick. The book reveals the modesty and charm of Michael Ventris, and reading it, I had the same feeling about John Chadwick. Even readers with no knowledge of Greek will enjoy this book, and all will see the importance, archaeologically, of the work. After all, it is no mean achievement to push back some seven centuries the date of the earliest known Greek inscriptions.

R.S.
