



Book Reviews

AN ANIMATE LANDSCAPE: ROCK ART AND THE PREHISTORY OF KILMARTIN, ARGYLL, SCOTLAND BY ANDREW MEIRION JONES, DAVINA FREEDMAN, BLAZE O'CONNOR†, HUGO LAMDIN-WHYMARK*, RICHARD TIPPING AND AARON WATSON

Oxford, Oxbow, Windgather Press, 2011. 356 pp, 153 figs listed, incl several b/w and colour photos, more photos unlisted, 55 tables, ISBN 978-1-905119-41-7 pb, £35/ €44

British and Irish 'rock art' continues to fascinate, puzzle, and attract research, and in presenting the results of a recent, AHRC-funded fieldwork project on rock art at Torbhlaren (and also of excavations led by Kilmartin House Museum at Ormaig), Andrew Jones and his colleagues have attempted to get to grips with issues of how, why and when that rock art was created in this part of western Scotland, and of how it fits within a broader context.

The aim of the book, as stated on p. xxvi, is 'to understand the significance of rock art [in this part of Scotland] by looking at the phenomenon at three scales, beginning with the rocks themselves, then looking at the activities associated with decorated rocks, and then situating that activity in a larger picture dealing with the chronology and evolution of the prehistoric landscape.' The intention to include a comparative review of Irish rock art, as a companion piece to Davina Freedman's review of Scottish rock art, sadly had to be abandoned due to the tragic, untimely death of Blaze O'Connor – a great loss to rock art studies, and to prehistory in general.

Following an introduction (Preface and Chapter 1) that sets out Jones' approach to the task, foregrounding issues of how we attach meaning to the past and how we present the results of archaeological investigations, the book falls into three sections. The first of these (comprising Chapter 2) reviews the micro-topography of rock art in the Kilmartin region, zooming in to examine the natural cracks and fissures in the outcrop surfaces and concluding that 'rock surfaces with specific patterns of cracks were ... [preferentially] chosen for carving...it seems that the rock surfaces themselves were addressed as though they had previously been carved...[and were] treated as if [these cracks and fissures] are *ancestral* designs' (p.33). In this way Jones introduces the idea that the rock surfaces themselves were regarded not as passive blank canvases, but as animate entities, with which people were interacting.

The second section (Chapters 3–6) covers the excavations at Torbhlaren (with the two excavated outcrops dubbed 'Tiger Rock' and 'Lion Rock', and dealt with separately); the palaeoenvironmental reconstruction work in Kilmichael Glen, undertaken by Richard Tipping and colleagues; and Hugo Lamdin-Whymark's research on the lithic finds from the excavations and his experimental replication of rock art motifs. The final section (Chapters 7–12 and Coda) attempts to place the Torbhlaren rock art in its broader context, starting with a comparison with the Ormaig rock art site and its finds, located a few kilometres to the north-west of Torbhlaren (Chapter 7). Chapter 8 examines the landscape setting of rock art in the Kilmartin area in terms of topography, altitude, visibility and intervisibility, using viewshed analysis undertaken by Paul Riggott to investigate patterning in the latter properties; in the light of the results, a critique of Richard Bradley's earlier reading of the evidence (Bradley 1997) is offered. Chapter 9 sets out to situate the creation and use of the rock art within a broader chronological narrative of developments in the Kilmartin region. Chapter 10 examines the orientation of rock art and of

built monuments in the area, concluding that they fit within a landscape whose natural topography itself lies along a sacred northeast–southwest alignment, associated with significant positions of both the sun and the moon. Chapter 11, by Davina Freedman, reviews Kilmartin rock art within the context of Scottish rock art in general, while Chapter 12 attempts to view Kilmartin’s links with the wider world in prehistory. The Coda returns to a contemplation of the false dichotomy between culture and nature, and restates Jones’ primary contention that, to the people who created and used rock art, landscapes are both animating (in that they physically interact with people, helping to shape forms of social life) and animated (i.e. are ‘living entities to be reckoned with’). The book ends with two Appendices, the first providing more details on Hugo Lamdin-Whymark’s experience of replicating rock art and the second presenting the results of soil micromorphology analysis of the ‘platform’ at Tiger Rock.

The end result is an attractively-produced book, containing much useful information and benefiting greatly from the photographs, illustrations, reconstructions and other artwork produced by the hugely talented Aaron Watson, the Project’s illustrator. There is much to praise about the enterprise. The care with which the rock art sites were excavated has produced an unexpectedly rich yield of information, finds and radiocarbon dates, and Lamdin-Whymark’s analysis and reporting of the lithic finds is excellent. Furthermore, his replication of rock art has brought valuable insights. While he was not the first person to undertake such replication – Euan MacKie created a cup-and-ring mark at Greenland, Dunbartonshire in 1984, for example (MacKie pers. comm; and see MacKie & Davis 1989 on his excavations there) – Lamdin-Whymark has nevertheless advanced our understanding, not least by showing what happens to quartz pebbles when used as hammerstones, to peck the designs: some split, others flake to create pseudo-cores, and others show no obvious use wear at all. Furthermore, in highlighting the repetitive, rhythmic, noisy nature of the act of pecking a design, and the fact that a freshly-created design can reveal striking colour differences in the ‘living’ rock, Lamdin-Whymark arguably gets us closer to understanding what it was actually like to create ‘rock art’, and why it was created, than do many of the other avenues of research pursued in the volume. The creation of the designs was clearly a highly ritualised, performative, trance-like act and this brings to mind Lewis-Williams’s suggestion that ‘rock art’ creation, by penetrating the surface of the rock, was a way of making contact with the Otherworld, and more specifically with the divine powers immanent in the rock (Lewis-Williams 2002; but cf. Paul Bahn’s trenchant critique of the entire Lewis-Williams *oeuvre*: Bahn 2010). Other useful insights from Lamdin-Whymark’s involvement in the project include his observation that the use of quartz pebbles as hammerstones at Torbhlaren, while potentially exploiting the symbolic properties of the rock, could also have been related to the hardness of the epidiorite outcrops: elsewhere, at Ormaig where the bedrock is softer, other types of rock were used for hammerstones as well as quartz (p.216).

The other strong point of the volume is the palaeoenvironmental work undertaken by Richard Tipping and his colleagues. This has provided valuable new information about the vegetational and land-use history of Kilmichael Glen, and the section on landscape reconstruction from pollen simulation modelling usefully guides us through several possible scenarios, making excellent use of the available information. Among the findings from the multi-strand palaeoenvironmental investigations are indications suggesting some kind of grazing activity in the Glen from as early as c 4300 BC; evidence for cereal cultivation on and/or near the valley floor from c 3400 BC; and signs interpreted as the deliberate creation (c 3000 BC) and subsequent felling (c 2600 BC) of oak woodland, by ‘a stable, confident community of farmers...able to utilise and conserve resources when required’ (p. 170). Elsewhere in the volume, Ben Pears’ and Richard Tipping’s soil micromorphology analysis of the ‘platform’ at Tiger Rock is especially valuable for having disproved the claim, expressed by Jones throughout the volume (and used as a major plank in his arguments), that a platform had been deliberately created around the outcrop. The so-called

'platform' relates to human activity, but in the form of trampling of existing sediments and the deposition of charcoal and of angular quartz (see below), rather than the deliberate construction of a platform.

This lack of fit between the scientifically-inferred interpretation of the Tiger Rock 'platform' and that expressed by Andrew Jones typifies the two key failings of the book, namely: i) issues of presentation; and ii) weaknesses in the reasoning used by the principal author. The cracks in Jones' arguments, especially as they relate to chronology but also as they relate to the interpretation of archaeological evidence, are as obvious as the fissures in the rock outcrops, and these vitiate an otherwise excellent volume.

The issues regarding presentation do not simply concern the inclusion of mutually contradictory statements, as in the case of the aforementioned 'platform'. They run much deeper and include a depressingly high frequency of mis-spellings (e.g. 'Portalloch' for 'Poltalloch' in Figs. 2.1 and 3.1) and grammatical errors (e.g. mixing singular with plural, as in 'The pale yellow-grey clay deposits...dips and reaches its lowest point', p.52) which would have been picked up, had the volume been given the rigorous edit that it so obviously needed. (The same could be said, incidentally, of the Forestry Commission's interpretation panel at Achhabreck (reproduced as Fig. 1.2), which cheerily and ungrammatically reassures the visitor: 'Your guess may be as good as an expert!') The ordering of the content could have been improved, with Lamdin-Whymark's Chapter 6 being a more logical successor to Chapters 3 and 4 than the palaeoenvironmental chapter, for example. The statistics relating to rock art as given in Chapters 2 and 11 would have been more digestible if presented graphically, rather than as lists or tables of numbers; and the radiocarbon dating evidence from the excavations should have been dealt with in a single section at the end of Chapter 4, including a comprehensive table that follows widely-accepted convention (e.g. in citing Laboratory numbers), rather than in the piecemeal and incomplete manner offered on pp. 57–8, 98, 102, 110–1 and 115. (Incidentally, an incorrect calibration is given for SUERC-29230, 4260 ± 30 BP: the 95.4% probability result, using OxCal 4.1, is 2930–2760 cal BC, rather than the quoted 2920–2860 version: pp. 58, 115.) More worrying is the fact that, despite Jones' stated commitment to the visual presentation of data (since 'Science and technology studies inform us that [this] is of great significance to...communication and comprehension...and helps persuade an audience to particular points of view', p.xxviii), there is not a single section drawing, except that produced by Pears and Tipping for the Tiger Rock non-platform; nor, indeed, is there a clear, large-scale, overall drawing of the rock art at Tiger Rock or Lion Rock. The inclusion of modern artworks (e.g. by Lucinda Naylor) shows an admirable desire to convey subjective as well as objective perspectives, but frankly does not help us make sense of the archaeology. Furthermore, the absence of an index makes it hard for the reader to check back on specific points, in trying to engage with the book's contents.

The volume's greatest shortcoming, however, lies in the principal author's interpretation of the available evidence, and the way in which that interpretation has been formed. The most crucial issue, and one upon which much of the book's content depends, is that of chronology. Knowing when, and over what period, the rock art was created (and also when other events occurred) is fundamental for setting that activity within a broader framework. We are offered various and conflicting statements at different points. On p. 118 we are told that 'If we consider the median dates [sic] [from those obtained from the excavations at Tiger and Lion Rocks] we are almost certainly looking at activity associated with rock art production in the later prehistoric period, the Late Neolithic to Late Bronze Age', and on p. 261 we are told 'On the basis of the radiocarbon dates from Torbhlaren the rock art in the region is likely to be initially carved between 2900–2800 BC and 2500–2300 cal BC, towards the end of the Neolithic sequence', while in Chapter 5 the reconstructions of the landscape around the time of rock art creation are predicated on an assumed date of c 2400 BC. Similarly, the statement 'rock art dates from the end of the

Neolithic' (p. 253) does not comfortably square with that on p. 245 to the effect: 'Rock art at Torbhlaren, and elsewhere in the Kilmartin region have [sic] evidently been produced over a considerable period of time...'. A final example: on p.59 the date of 2580–2340 cal BC, from a stake-built structure beside Tiger Rock, is described as a *terminus post quem* for rock art creation but in the next sentence it is stated that the date of [2920–2860] cal BC – see above – 'provides a potentially more direct date'.

Taking a critical view of the radiocarbon dating evidence, can *any* of the dates obtained from Tiger and Lion Rocks be associated unequivocally with the creation of rock art? The answer, sadly, is no, even though the aforementioned SUERC-29230, from *maloideae*-species charcoal associated with a possible hammerstone sealed in a fissure on Tiger Rock (p. 60), may show the least weak association – even though the taphonomy of the dated sample still requires explanation. The stake-built structure is not directly linked with rock art creation and may instead have been linked to a Chalcolithic episode of cooking beside the rock, given the slightness of its construction and the evidence for burning. It need not provide a *terminus post quem* for rock art creation since the quartz fragments that lie on the non-platform above it can be interpreted (*contra* Jones *et al.*) as the remains of Middle-to-Late Bronze Age ceremonies featuring the deliberate smashing of quartz (as attested elsewhere in the Kilmartin area, for example at kerb-cairns), rather than as broken hammerstones. Indeed, the charcoal from a rock shelf, 'Fissure' 19, on Lion Rock, with its date of 1320–1110 cal BC, could perhaps relate to such activity, as might the erection of the standing stone nearby. Furthermore, those hammerstones that were found in the layers above the stake-built structure could, as Lamdin-Whymark observes, have moved or been moved down from the outcrop surface long after the rock art had been constructed (p. 70).

Problems with chronology abound elsewhere, with Jones seeming to argue at some points that the short stone rows and stone settings at Ballymeanoch and Nether Largie may date to the Middle-to-Late Bronze Age (as the NMS-commissioned date for Ballymeanoch suggests), and elsewhere (e.g. p. 266) that they were erected during the Early Bronze Age. Part of the confusion arises from the fact that a monolith with two pecked circles had been found under the Early Bronze Age cairn at Nether Largie North. What Jones fails to grasp – and as this reviewer has recently emphasised in her own reading of the sequence of activities in Kilmartin Glen (Sheridan 2012) – is that the Nether Largie North stone could well have been taken from the by-then centuries-old stone circle at Temple Wood South. It is different in shape, size and nature from the slabs of cup/cup-and-ring-marked bedrock that were (*contra* Jones) prised up and used in the Nether Largie and Ballymeanoch stone settings, probably c 1300–1100 BC. (That act of re-using bedrock with rock art echoed an earlier act, probably during the 22nd century BC, when a slab had been prised up, embellished with axehead carvings, and used as the capstone for the Nether Largie North cist.)

Other chronological infelicities include the claim, on p. 175, that the felling of oak trees c 2400 BC was contemporary with the construction of the timber circle and avenue at Upper Largie, and that the Glennan Vase Urn dates to c. 1500 BC (p.264 – with this reviewer being cited as the source). As made clear in the publication of the Upper Largie excavations (Cook *et al.* 2010; cf. Sheridan 2012), the timber circle there dates to 1600–1400 BC and the avenue's date is problematic; and as for the Glennan urn date, not only did this author *not* say that it dates to 1500 BC, she arranged for the associated cremated bone to be dated, with the result of 3615±35 BP (GrA-24861, 2130–1880 cal BC at 95.4% probability) being published as a Postscript to the very excavation report that Jones cites (MacGregor 2003; <http://www.sair.org.uk/sair8/>)!

This is not nit-picking, but instead a plea for clarity and rigour in the process of interpreting evidence and building a narrative, especially when the argument depends so heavily on

chronological evidence. Unfortunately, the principal author's shortcomings as an excavator and as an artefact specialist are also laid bare: showing a touching honesty when revealing his thought processes, on p. 55 he states: 'At the edge of the trench to the east a series of charcoal spreads were revealed. On cleaning back these charcoal spreads were shown to be artefacts of excavation, in fact these were root mats at the base of the platform.' And his report on two minuscule beads from Lion Rock makes one wonder why the services of a bead specialist were not called upon. There are also omissions: in discussing the Ormaig excavation it is not made clear that the excavations were initiated by Kilmartin House Museum, as part of the Dalriada Project, with the laser-scanning being done by AOC Archaeology, rather than RCAHMS; and the fact that one of the radiocarbon dates (SUERC-17359) was organised by National Museums Scotland and paid for by Historic Scotland is not mentioned.

The volume offers us much food for thought, and leaves many questions still to be addressed. The range of artefactual finds speaks of activities in the Glen over several millennia, for example, and this information can be integrated within broader narratives for the region (cf. Sheridan 2012; Webb 2012). The question of whether the early grazing activity belonged to Early Neolithic pastoralists (as claimed on p.160), or to Late Mesolithic deer, deserves closer scrutiny. We may debate whether the creation of rock art was, as Jones claims, related to a fundamental re-ordering of the landscape during the Late Neolithic; and the whole issue of the broader Atlantic context of rock art, and of its relationship with passage tomb and Grooved Ware designs – topics that only received superficial treatment here – needs to be unpicked. (See, for example, Bradley 1997; Waddington 2007; Shee Twohig *et al.* 2010) It may indeed be that rock art of the type that forms the focus of this volume was created during the first half of the third millennium BC. We know, from many examples of its re-use both in this area and elsewhere, that it was created prior to the Early Bronze Age (although that is not to rule out the possibility that some was created after that date: the aforementioned Greenland site, for example, includes a probable example of where rock art was 'reinstated' on the outcrop after quarrying of a slab for use elsewhere). Furthermore, the evidence from Backstone Beck on Ilkley Moor, West Yorkshire – where activity associated with Grooved Ware and dated to this period was found close to rock carvings (Edwards & Bradley 1999) – might be taken to support an early third millennium date, although spatial proximity does not prove contemporaneity. Essentially, many more dates for rock art sites are needed. *An Animate Landscape* is indeed a valuable addition to the literature on British and Irish rock art and should serve to stimulate fresh debate and further research.

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