



Book Reviews

ARCHER, JOURNEY TO STONEHENGE BY J BRAYNE

Small Boat Books, 2016. 32pp extensively illustrated, pb, ISBN 978-1-526-20436-3, £9.50

Most archaeologists will be familiar with the spectacular early Beaker burial excavated in 2002 not far from Stonehenge by a team from Wessex Archaeology. Dubbed the 'Amesbury Archer', this man was buried with an extraordinary array of objects, including five Beaker pots and some of the earliest metal artefacts in Britain. Jane Brayne, an experienced archaeological illustrator who worked with Wessex Archaeology, was asked to rapidly produce a reconstruction, in order to provide the enthralled media with a glimpse of this early Bronze Age man. Her beautiful watercolour of the archer attending to his arrow and accompanied by his dog has become one of the most familiar reconstructions depicting British prehistory.

Since the discovery, the full academic monograph on the Amesbury Archer has appeared in print (Fitzpatrick 2011), covering not only this grave but also the nearby 'companion' and the individuals interred in a multiple burial, the 'Boscombe Bowmen'. This volume provided academic archaeologists with detailed insights into the life and death of the archer, from his severely injured knee to the intricately made items of gold jewellery that accompanied him to the grave. Of major importance for re-awakening the debate about the arrival of Beaker pottery and the earliest metal goods to the British Isles at the end of the Neolithic period, the archer's strontium and oxygen isotope results showed that he had been brought up on the Continent, probably in the Alpine region.

Now, Jane Brayne has independently produced a companion volume to that academic monograph. Aimed at children aged 9–12, *Archer, Journey to Stonehenge* is a self-published comic book adventure story of the Amesbury Archer's life, in fascinating and complex detail. The beautifully produced volume is evidently a labour of love and Brayne's artistic style is wonderfully engaging, somewhat reminiscent Janet Ahlberg's children's book illustrations. It is clear that many hours of research have been spent on the book, not only in creating a plausible and convincing story, but also in the attention to detail of the clothing, the objects and the landscapes that are depicted.

The storyline begins with the young man, the son of a chief, living in the Alpine region. We see him completing the hunting and metalworking tasks that mark his transition to adulthood, while being introduced to his community and their beliefs in the power of the sun and metalworking. He then has to accompany his sister on a journey to the west where she is to be married into another tribe, the journey full of calamity. After the wedding the archer and his companions are invited to visit the great stone temple beyond the sea to the west, where they find 'the Observers' in control of the sun god, and a group of resident smiths making copper objects. A risky intervention at the solstice celebrations by the young archer leads to a life-threatening injury, and he is unable to make the return journey home. This very brief outline in no way does justice to the exciting storyline, which involves much journeying and adventure, the death and injury of companions, an eventful visit to Carnac and even an encounter with some killer whales!

Archer, Journey to Stonehenge is a work of creative fiction, but it draws carefully on the nuance and detail of the archaeological record. Particularly compelling is the way in which the various artefacts are woven into the biography of the archer. The antler pin, for example, is given by his father on the boy's departure from home, an heirloom from his grandfather; the oyster shell is given during the crossing of the Channel; the boar's tusk is a memento of his boyhood

trials. In this way each object, some with their own pre-existing biographies, are woven into the journeys and life of the archer, eventually forming part of the assemblage of grave goods on his death.

Also arresting for the archaeologists was the way in which different groups and communities were shown living at the same time, with overlapping spheres of influence and trading relations, with their own traditions and monuments but with similar underlying principles of belief. Perhaps this conflates time and action down into a few short centuries, but it enabled differences and conflict between groups to be shown as well as harmony. Despite this, it is a rather traditional, perhaps even stereotypical, early Bronze Age European world that is portrayed, with the men hunting and working metal, the women doing the cooking and being married off. It would have been good to see challenges to some of these too-often repeated tropes about gender and daily life in prehistory. Some details were pleasing for the expert eye to pick out; two of the three stones in the entrance to Stonehenge have fallen; the patterns of the clothing, based on anthropomorphic stones from a Beaker cemetery at Sion in the Upper Rhone Valley in Switzerland (Harrison & Heyd 2007) are portrayed as having deeper meanings of kinship and place. Others details, such as a Beaker being filled with cow's milk and the houses at Durrington Walls looking like bender huts, fall slightly wide of the mark. But these are minor criticisms and do not in any way overshadow the fantastic storytelling and beautiful imagery of the book.

The overarching plot portrays 2300 BC as a time of great change and gives a wonderful sense of how the actions of individuals can change the flow of longer histories, something that we as archaeologists often struggle to grapple with in our narratives. It also shows the scale of change and movement that can occur within a single generation; a story that our most recent radiocarbon dates are now able to tell us. There is an excellent 'archaeological' section at the end of the book that sets out some of the evidence of the Amesbury Archer's burial and the objects found with him, as well as a map of his journey. This could have been expanded with some recommended further reading, or perhaps museums and sites to visit. Even with this, the ending of the novel could be slightly confusing for younger readers or those not familiar with the archaeological evidence – the actual death and burial of the archer by the local Beaker-using community is not shown, and this link between the character and the archaeology is left implicit.

The portrayal of the speech, thoughts and beliefs of the various characters isn't perhaps strange or otherworldly enough to get across the sense of prehistoric people with totally different perspectives, beliefs and lifestyles to us today. This portrayal of a different worldview is achieved rather better in the *Mezolith* series of graphic novels (Haggarty & Brockbank 2010) which portray the life of a boy growing up in Mesolithic East Yorkshire. The stories include dream sequences, animals and shamans, told through cinematic concepts and sometimes unnerving graphics, which somehow get across some aspects of the horror and strangeness of prehistory in a startling way. That said, Brayne's book sits within a new and emerging genre of British archaeological graphic novels that include not only *Mezolith* but also work by artists such as John Swogger (recently commissioned by Cadw to produce a series of comics relating to prehistoric sites in their care, including Bryn Celli Ddu), with the styles and genre inspiring other artists such as Alice Watterson and Aaron Watson. The emphasis here is on Britain; our colleagues in France, following in the long tradition of *Asterix the Gaul*, have been producing archaeological graphic novels for many years. At the Maison des Mégalithes information centre at Carnac, the shop has an entire wall of such volumes for sale to visitors, clearly popular with both children and adults. Brayne's book too, although aimed at children, will appeal equally to teenagers and adults, as well as being a fantastic resource for those teaching prehistory in schools. The genre of the graphic novel has great potential to convey the intangible and imaginative side of archaeological interpretation that can be difficult to get across in more traditional forms of publication.

It's an old adage that a picture paints a thousand words; even more so when many images are linked together into a compelling narrative, providing a level of detail and complexity unparalleled by other forms of interpretation. To write imaginative history of this calibre takes time, patience and immense skill. It is to be hoped that Brayne's dedication to

the story of the Amesbury Archer will inspire others to use graphic novels to tell the endlessly fascinating stories of our past.

References

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