



## Book Reviews

### **BREAKING THE SURFACE: AN ART/ARCHAEOLOGY OF PREHISTORIC ARCHITECTURE BY DOUG BAILEY**

*Oxford University Press, Oxford. 2018, 338pp, 121 figs, pb, ISBN 9780190611880, £25.49*

For many years archaeologists have struggled with the problem of addressing prehistoric worlds that may have been experienced and understood in ways that are remote from those of the modern west, and yet are only accessible to us through their material traces. The observations of social anthropologists have provided a perennial source of insights that help to challenge our contemporary prejudices and expectations, but the danger of imposing an 'ethnographic present' on the past is ever-present. Many prehistorians presently engage with various forms of philosophical thought as a way of looking at their evidence in fresh and counter-intuitive ways, but in this book Doug Bailey adopts a different and novel strategy. Bailey presents *Breaking the Surface* as a work of 'art/archaeology', a practice that emerges from the encounter between two disciplines, in which archaeological materials are removed from their normal context and deployed in artistic ways to create unfamiliar perspectives. However, in practice the book works in the opposite direction, drawing on the work of artists, psychologists and linguistic anthropologists in order to shed new light on a supremely archaeological phenomenon: holes in the ground.

This project was inspired by Bailey's experience of excavating Early Neolithic Criş pit-houses at Măgura in Romania. These are amorphous semi-subterranean structures, which might contain kilns, burials, feasting debris or traces of craft activities, but it is unclear whether they were always roofed. Were they houses, more informal dwellings, working hollows or something else altogether? Faced with this interpretive impasse, Bailey returns to a strategy that he originally applied to the study of prehistoric figurines (eg, Bailey *et al.* 2010), of juxtaposing archaeological material with disparate and ostensibly inappropriate comparators, thereby sparking new ideas. What follows is a kind of extended thought experiment, in which a series of different contexts in which cutting, opening, digging and breaking take place are interrogated, cumulatively building a new understanding of why people in the distant past might have dug into the earth. The results are always engaging, and often profound. Bailey reveals that this is a book that has been a long time in the writing, and it is also one that has been carefully put together, with great attention to detail. This is evident in the series of 'intertexts', brief but illuminating vignettes of cutting events (stabblings, self-harm and burial) interspersed between the chapters, and the increasingly intrusive 'holes' that progressively obscure the chapter headings.

Emerging at the start of the Balkan Neolithic, pit-houses have been understood in social-evolutionary terms as a halfway stage toward above-ground buildings and sedentary villages. One way of moving beyond this view is to consider the depositional practices that took place within the structures, but as Bailey reasonably points out, the debate on structured deposition has tended to neglect the act of digging the container of deposits, which itself represents a kind of performance. At this point, Bailey's argument takes the first of series of sudden swerves, and we find ourselves in Patrick's Cabaret in Minneapolis in 1994, watching the performance artist Ron Athey cutting the skin of a fellow performer and mopping the blood on paper towels that are then swept up over the heads of the audience. This shocking, transgressive act introduces the idea that the cutter can be a performer, whose acts have an emotional resonance both for those who actually witness them, and for more remote audiences (in this case, journalists and politicians). Potentially, feelings of offense and violation might also have been experienced by those who observed the ground being cut open by specific, privileged people at Măgura, exposing the unfamiliar materials of the earth. Neolithic architecture involved numerous interventions into the soil, from postholes to foundation slots, while the sowing of seeds and the burial of the dead involved further openings that revealed what had formerly been hidden.

Bailey's next source of inspiration lies in psychology and philosophy, and the recognition that holes represent a kind of conceptual anomaly. They are not entities, since they have no characteristics, but are they merely absences? One answer to this conundrum is that cutting holes creates surfaces, and that holes never exist in isolation since they are always dug into some kind of surface. Holes reside in materials, and they in turn can be host to a filling of some form. Holes may be entirely negative, but they are nonetheless regions of time and space, and ones that are apparently especially conspicuous to human cognition. These quite abstract arguments are immediately brought to bear on the first of two archaeological examples, the Wilsford Shaft near Stonehenge in Wiltshire. This deep, Middle Bronze Age feature cut into the chalk subsoil was excavated by Paul Ashbee and colleagues in the 1960s, on the initial understanding that it might represent a pond barrow. An inconclusive debate had developed between those who held the view that the shaft was a functional well, and those who preferred the notion that it had been dug to receive ritual deposits. Bailey suggests that this opposition may be unhelpful, and seeks to place the feature into a picture of a landscape that had recently been reorganised horizontally, around field systems and enclosed settlements, but within which the digging of pits and ditches took people vertically into a different realm of experience. The Wilsford Shaft might or might not have been a source of water, but what was important was the act of digging and the alterity that it opened up to the diggers.

Another excursion into the world of art practice takes us to Paris in the 1970s, where Gordon Matta-Clark creates *Conical Intersect*, a large hole cut through a 17th-century building in the

fourth arrondissement, shortly before it was demolished to make way for the Pompidou Centre that was being constructed nearby. Matta-Clark's project was met with incredulity, but Bailey shows how it developed a complex play of visibility and invisibility, revealing what is normally hidden (the insides of the building) while also focusing the gaze on what is to be seen in its surroundings. This was a political intervention, which drew attention to the gentrification of the area, while emphasising the opening up of entities as a way of knowing them more deeply. Quite different insights are then drawn from the work of a group of linguistic anthropologists from the Max Planck Institute, who sought to document the different ways in which peoples around the world expressed the concepts of cutting and breaking. The important message that Bailey draws from this is that people in the prehistoric past may not have conceived of these operations in ways that would be remotely familiar to us. Many language-groups apparently emphasise the resultant state of an object that has been cut, such that the loss of its integrity is the principal preoccupation. Taking this observation back to the Neolithic context, the author asks whether the digging of pits might have been understood as having violated the coherence of the ground. Equally, the linguistic studies emphasised that the way a cut is conceptualised often depends on the object that is used and the kind of action employed in cutting. Another archaeological case study then takes the reader to the Neolithic causewayed enclosure of Etton in Cambridgeshire. Here, Bailey draws attention to the way that acts of cutting and backfilling in the enclosing ditch repeatedly created and transformed a series of surfaces, modulating the liminal threshold between the ground and the under-ground, and in the process giving the place a new identity.

A final foray into visual art is concerned with the work of Lucio Fontana, whose *buchi* and *tagli* involved the perforation and slashing of canvases, which combined with sources of light to create ephemeral experiences for the onlooker. Fontana's intention was to break down the notion of the artwork as a stable finished entity, and to valorise the way that movement, light and time can establish new worlds of perception. At this point, the book begins to escalate toward its conclusion, drawing together the strands of argument that have been developed in the preceding chapters. First, Bailey introduces Tim Ingold's discussion of the ground as a textured mesh of substances, rather than a solid boundary between the material and the immaterial. Hitherto, people lived lives that were connected to (or integral to) this ground, but in the modern era Ingold suggests that we have come to live an increasingly 'groundless' existence, separated from our tangible environment by technology and dualistic thinking. Bailey then connects this with the linguist Steven Levinson's discussion of three ways in which people can understand the spatial positioning of entities in the world: relative, intrinsic and absolute. The important contrast is between the first and third of these: the ego-centred and individualistic relative system, in which objects are located in relation to the onlooker's body ('the cat is to the

left of me'), and the absolute system that places things in relation to cardinal points or landscape features, entirely independent of the viewer ('the cat is on the mat').

Bailey's core argument is that the Neolithic saw the start of a gradual change from an absolute to a relative system of reference, from seeing the world as a totality to which one's own presence is incidental, to perceiving it from the focal point of one's own body. The proliferation of holes of one kind or another was part and parcel of this change, violating and disrupting a holistic understanding of the landscape while offering glimpses of other worlds entirely. The emerging body-focused ontology was one that was more readily expressed through a new suite of material things, ranging from anthropomorphic figurines to internally divided architecture and the burial of bodies with accompanying grave goods. This is an outstanding and stimulating book, filled with original ideas and thoughtful reflections, and as such it can be thoroughly recommended. Bailey's engagement with art history and art criticism is deep, scholarly and productive, and the only mildly negative criticism that one could really make about the volume is that while his case studies repay careful reading, a few of his readers will probably choose to skim the extended discussions of artistic practice.

## **Reference**

Bailey, D., Cochrane, A. & Zambelli, J. 2010. *Unearthed: A Comparative Study of Jōmon Dogū and Neolithic Figurines*. Norwich: Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts

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