



## Book Reviews

### **DESIGN AND CONNECTIVITY THE CASE OF ATLANTIC ROCK ART BY JOANA VALDEZ-TULLETT**

*BAR Int Ser 2932. Oxford. 2019. 262pp, 162 figures, 61 graphs, 42 tables, pb, ISBN 978-1-4073-1662-8, £55.00*

It is now more than twenty years since Richard Bradley first popularised the term ‘Atlantic Rock Art’ to describe a tradition of ‘open-air’ (as opposed to ‘megalithic’) carving on bedrock and boulders. Stretching from Portugal to Scotland, and from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age, these largely circular forms, commonly known as ‘cup-and-ring’ art, appear to exhibit clear similarities in form and deployment, suggestive of a shared understanding. Despite common acceptance and frequent usage of the classification, few researchers have been sufficiently ambitious to study the entire corpus in a systematic way. Similarly, although early, motif-based approaches have long been expanded to include wider consideration of the rock medium and its landscape situation – as reflected in the methodologies of recent large-scale recording projects – researchers have struggled to integrate so many variables into a comprehensive evaluation of the data collected.

This much-anticipated volume represents the first comprehensive analytical investigation of the character of Atlantic Rock Art, represented by samples selected from five regions; it explores both the nature and extent of the connections between those clusters. In publishing her doctoral thesis, Valdez-Tullett has provided an enormous service to scholars of rock art and of prehistory more generally, clearly demonstrating how the carved stones – a strand of evidence often neglected in wider narratives of the period – have the potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the inter-connections, the influences, and the social networks operating across Atlantic Europe during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Using a fundamentally empirical and integrated multi-scalar approach, Valdez-Tullett seeks to produce solid statistical data to support connections that have previously been based only on limited observations of unquantified ‘similarity’.

This well-organised volume leads the reader carefully through the world of cup-and-ring research in Western Europe; it is an important addition to the literature, updating Bradley’s seminal *Rock Art and the Prehistory of Atlantic Europe* (1997) and provides a direction for future studies in an increasingly data-dominated research environment.

*Design and Connectivity* begins with a useful overview of the key concepts and characteristics of Atlantic Rock Art, and a critical review of the previous approaches. In Chapter 3, we move to the

more practical considerations of undertaking such a geographically-wide, inter-regional analysis with an introduction to the study regions included: The Machars (Scotland), Ilkley Moor (England), Iveragh Peninsula (Ireland), Barbanza Peninsula (Spain) and Monte Faro (Portugal). These were selected because they fulfilled the criteria of containing at least 30 carved panels with accessible or published data. Further information to explain why these particular clusters were selected over other possible options would have been valuable.

Chapter 4 presents the author's working hypothesis of cultural transmission and poses the research questions that frame the analysis. In brief: just what was so special about rock art that it lingered in time and space for so long?

Chapters 5 and 6 introduce the underlying theoretical framework and the methodological approaches applied. A discussion of the challenges involved in creating a meaningful scheme of categorisation is followed by an overview of the recording techniques used to gather the attributes to be classified. GIS-based spatial analysis and digital recording techniques such as Reflectance Transformation Imaging are combined with more traditional and sensorial/experiential approaches to ensure the multi-scalar levels of detail required to enhance published datasets for each region.

The analysis of final dataset is presented in Chapter 7. At 70 pages, this is the real core of the publication, together with the extensive supporting information in the Appendices will provide researchers with much new information to digest and dissect. A total of 5039 motifs on 263 rocks were analysed in relation to a total of 11 categories containing 341 attributes were considered using a presence/absence matrix. The results and discussion for each category (i.e. each scale of analysis) are illustrated with numerous charts (with bar charts in colour) that, whilst helpful, would have benefitted from being larger, and with an excellent series of black and white photographs and 3-D models (which are also used to good effect throughout the publication). The final stage of analysis involved the examination of the dataset from a relational perspective in order to identify similarities and differences between the study regions using the principles of Social Network Analysis. The data was translated into a set of nodes (carved panels) and a set of relationships (attributes) and subjected to analysis in an Affiliation Network. The results showed a high level of similarity between the five regions, with all study areas directly connected to both Ireland and Spain. Further modulation, designed to optimise the groupings of strongly connected nodes, revealed particularly strong connections between Ilkley Moor and the Iveragh Peninsula.

Chapter 8 explores the connectedness illustrated by the analysis, suggesting modes of cultural transmission both at a local, familial level, as well as in the wider, international arena, the latter via long distance travel contacts, travel and trade. In a final brief epilogue, Valdez-Tullett reflects on her own journey of discovery, summarising research approaches and drawing together her

conclusions: that a package composed of 'quintessential Atlantic motifs' was transmitted between the study areas, and further developed locally, with regional variations and preferences.

That this summation is no 'giant leap' in terms of our understanding of the Atlantic Rock Art tradition is, perhaps, a little disappointing but is to be expected. The study did not set out to provide a grand, unifying theory of cup-and-ring marks but rather to provide an empirical basis for observations made in the field over many centuries of recording. The results of the analysis are also limited to the specific study regions selected for inclusion: the carved stones of Ilkley Moor are certainly not representative of all 'English' rock art any more than those of the other regions reflect wider territories; the full corpus of rock art of Atlantic Rock Art contains much more variety and has many more tales to tell. The study's findings are also, inevitably, chronologically vague: the panels included in the analysis are undated and may represent an assemblage accumulated over two millennia, or single episodes occurring at unknown dates throughout. This clearly has implications for the dynamics of any connections postulated.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this is a very valuable starting point, leading the way for future analyses of the growing datasets available for Atlantic Rock Art. The holistic methodological approach developed by Valdez-Tullett will surely provide the basis for further investigations that test difference and similarity (and hence connectedness) both within and between each of the surviving clusters of Atlantic Rock Art which, despite a veneer of resemblance, vary hugely if such a multi-scalar, multi-attribute approach is applied. We have recognised for some time the need to gather information in a complete and comprehensive way, from surface microtopography to broad landscape situation. Now we have a methodology for using that expanding dataset to confirm (Valdez-Tullett suggests 'demystify') the many gut feelings that rock art scholars have expressed but been unable to demonstrate. By doing so, and by relating our findings to other studies of materiality and social dynamics, we may move a little closer to the goal of making rock art a truly valuable contributor in unravelling the wider prehistoric story.

## **Reference**

Bradley, R. 1997. *Rock Art and the Prehistory of Atlantic Europe: Signing the Land*. London: Routledge

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