



Book Reviews

THE USE AND REUSE OF STONE CIRCLES. FIELDWORK AT FIVE SCOTTISH MONUMENTS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS EDITED BY RICHARD BRADLEY AND COURTNEY NIMURA

Oxbow Books, Oxford. 2016, 168pp, 148 col & B&W figs, 9 tables, pb, ISBN 978-1-78570-243-3, £39.95

The relative slimness of this book is deceptive: it contains reports on five excavations, written in Richard Bradley's trademark accessible style, working in collaboration with a wide range of contributors including the co-editor of the volume, Courtney Nimura. Through a series of self-contained accounts of the work undertaken at these sites, the editors have been able to add depth and breadth to an emerging narrative of concentric monumentality in Bronze Age northern Scotland, and the way that they have done this has lessons for us all.

There are a number of ways of viewing the position of this book within a wider context, none of which do it justice. It could be argued for instance that this book is a footnote to a major and significant campaign of fieldwork and publications by Bradley on a range of Bronze Age monuments of Northeast and northern Scotland, although this would be to minimise its weight. It could also be viewed as a miscellaneous collection of excavations from the aforementioned campaign, reporting as it does on work at Hillend recumbent stone circle, Croftmoraig stone setting, Hill of Tuach henge and stone circle, and multi-period sites at Waulkmill and Laikenbuie, but this would be to ignore the strong threads and themes that underlie all this work. It might even be that this book will come to be judged as an unofficial sequel (as indeed the editors suggest that this should be the case) of Colin Richards' 2013 book *Building the Great Stone Circles of the North* (Windgather Press) although that is no bad thing. However, none of these observations should be used to play down the quality and usefulness of this book.

Reports on five excavations ranging across Inverness-shire, Aberdeenshire and Perth and Kinross form the first half of the volume. All five chapters deal with sites that are anomalous and have in the past been poorly understood, with a recurring theme the limitations of single (or indeed any) typological labels to describe these sites. The historiography of each is described nicely, sometimes utilising historic photos and drawings, at its most effective in the discussion of the backstory of Croftmoraig. As well as completely rethinking the sequence of this monument through excavation, Bradley and his researchers were able to dig out original plans and photos from the 1960s excavation of the site, an invaluable lesson into the kinds of insights that can be gained from excavating archives as well as monuments, the efficacy of revisiting. The work undertaken at each site is described to an adequate but not exhaustive level of detail by a range of different authors, with particular specialist interventions given room to breathe where required, perhaps most notably Mark Hall's discussion of a set of Roman period gaming pieces found in the nineteenth century and during Bradley's excavations at Waulkmill. The chapter on work at Laikenbuie, an Iron Age ring-cairn, seems anomalous to the overall theme, notably a chapter with no Bradley authorial role. Aside from this slight glitch, the excavation chapters present some fascinating discoveries, such a spectacular group of cremation urns from the weird Hill of Tuach henge, associated with an assemblage including a razor found in 2011.

The second, shorter, half of the book contextualises these discoveries both within the broader programme of work that Bradley has been undertaking, but also in light of Colin Richards' aforementioned recent work on much bigger stone circles in the Scottish islands. Musings on the differences between big and small stone circles – in effect, Neolithic v

Bronze Age stone circles, to a lesser extent northern v southern – work very well. The point is well made that circles of stones are often only a small part of the story, often the final or near final phase. More broadly, a review of the later Roman Iron Age, Pictish and early Medieval use of some of these sites is presented, with an interesting discussion on the association of roundhouses with recumbent stone circles and other megaliths in this region, something Bradley has been exploring for over a decade now. This 'histories of re-use' chapter would I feel have benefited from a broader non-megalithic perspective, with no mention for instance of Stephen Driscoll's work on Pictish re-use of Neolithic earthwork and timber monuments at Forteviot, Perth and Kinross, relationships made tangible by recent Strathearn Environs and Royal Forteviot Project (SERF) excavations (Driscoll *et al.* 2010).

The book closes with a detailed analysis of Croftmoraig, a complex site which has undergone major re-evaluation in the last decade, and this contribution offers a welcome update on Bradley's earlier ceramics-based rethink of this monument with Alison Sheridan (2005) when the site was still called Croft Moraig. This is a monument that defies perceived logic in terms of sequence, containing a surprising juxtaposition of styles and materials and appears to have been deeply connected to both the 'land and the sky'. As Bradley argues in the last sentences of the book, investigating this modest but complex site (and indeed the other non-glamorous sites from this un-glamorous region) should inform approaches to prehistoric monuments across Britain. These discussion chapters, it could be argued, are a little disconnected from one another in sequence, scope and content, not showing the narrative development Bradley demonstrated in *The Good Stones* (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2000), while ending the book on Croftmoraig and not a punchy concluding chapter gives the book a rather abrupt ending although not quite an anti-climax.

As noted already, this book is the latest in a sequence of important volumes based on excavations in the Northeast, and the northern Highlands of Scotland, undertaken by Bradley since the 1990s. The earlier *The Good Stones*, *The Moon and the Bonfire* (2005) and *Stages and Screens* (2011) were all published by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and so this latest book offers something of a departure. However, this does not mean a diminishing of quality and quantity in terms of illustrations from the previous three books. Colour photos and line drawings are evident throughout, the latter working well for the most part despite some peculiar sickly colour palettes. There are some issues related to consistency in the form and look of the plans and location maps, indicative of an attempt to pull together such a diverse range of work, but this is a minor niggle. Excavation photographs have been annotated to help make sense of dense spreads of stones, while kite views, landscape shots and archive photos are used to good effect. The whole effect is rather pleasing, and words and pictures blend well together.

The Use and Reuse of Stone Circles is a nice wee book in other words, which brings together a seemingly diverse group of sites and monuments, and places them within a compelling wider narrative. The only surprise about how revealing Bradley's well-judged efficient excavations can be is that this should be a surprise anymore: he has shown that cracking chronological puzzles and generating regional narratives can start with the most unpromising of materials. The benefit of re-visiting sites that had been excavated before, and drawing on local knowledge, are all too evident as well. This book is a siren call for the forgotten regional monuments that can be found all over Britain.

References

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- Driscoll, S. T., Brophy, K. & Noble, G. 2010. The Strathearn Environs and Royal Forteviot Project (SERF). *Antiquity* Project Gallery. <<http://antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/driscoll323/>> (last accessed 24 March 2017)

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Review submitted: March 2017

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