This handsome book is the outcome of a session at the 2013 European Association of Archaeologists in Pilsen, organised by the editors on the cultural biographies of monuments. It is divided into three sections, with the main part comprising 13 detailed case-studies, framed on either side by shorter introduction and discussion pieces. There is variety in the chronologies, subject matters and geographical scopes addressed; in short there is something for almost everyone! In their Introduction, the editors advocate that archaeologists require a more reflexive conceptual toolkit to deal with the complex issues of monument continuity, transformation, re-use and abandonment, and the significance of the speed and the timing of changes. They also critique the loaded term ‘afterlife’ as this separates the unfolding biography of a monument, and unwittingly relegates later activities to lesser importance than its original function. In the following chapter, Joyce Salisbury explores how the veneration of natural places in the landscape, such as caves and mountains, was shifted to man-made monumental features over time.

The bulk of the book focuses on the specific case-studies which span Denmark in the north to Tunisia in the south and from Ireland in the west to Serbia and Crete in the east. In Chapter 3, Steen Hvass’s account of the history of research at the monument complex of King’s Jelling in Denmark is fascinating, but a little heavy on stratigraphic narrative, and light on theory and discussion. The following chapter by Gabriel Cooney on Irish megaliths, however, is a wonderful balance of evidence and interpretation. Cooney makes the important point that they reflect discontinuous episodic activity (p57). By employing three contrasting case-studies, he draws out the complex narratives at Tara, Knowth and Newgrange and reveals how monument histories vary depending on whether their remains were reinterpreted, confronted or used for legitimation.

Howard Williams tackles the epic of Beowulf in Chapter 5, following a highly innovative and engaging approach that challenges previous interpretations of the megalithic chamber in the poem as single-phase and Neolithic. He re-investigates the potential multi-temporal nature alluded to in the prose’s rich allegories, and recounts it from an early medieval perspective. In the subsequent chapter, David Wheatley provides a textured narrative of Avebury, and like Cooney in Chapter 4, he draws out the punctuated rhythmical activity witnessed in this landscape. He convincingly argues that Avebury was always a work in progress, and like many other monuments, unfolded according to a chain of events, contra Stukeley’s vision of the site as a pre-planned concept.

Chapters 7 and 8 focus on stone monoliths – statue-menhirs and stelae. Heather Sabire traces the life histories of two statue-menhirs in Guernsey from the Neolithic to the present day. Through acts of movement, concealment, partial disfigurement and remodelling, she shows how these decorated stones changed meaning and relevance through time, and are now back on display as popular attractions. Employing GIS-based approaches, Luc Laporte et al. compare the Breton Neolithic standing stones and Iron Age stelae and suggest that the later stelae could have been inspired by or actually re-used the Neolithic stones, although these observations are not yet supported by fieldwork. This is a rather descriptive chapter, and would have benefited from further interpretation on their re-appropriation. Brittany is also the study-area for Mara Vejby in the following stimulating chapter on the re-activation of megalithic tombs. She concludes that interaction with the distant past may have been elicited in order to remember a more recent past – a traumatic Roman naval battle.

Chapters 10 and 11 both focus on Iberian monuments. Leonardo García Sanjuán and Marta Díaz-Guardamino engage with a range of monuments – megalithic tombs, statue-menhirs and stelae – with extensive life biographies in central and southern Spain. Miguel Ángel de Blas Cortina investigates why several megalithic monuments in Asturias were re-used as medieval churches. Francesco Fedele reassesses the Chalcolithic stelae of Val Calmonica in Chapter 12. He reasons that their destruction in the
first few centuries AD was more complicated than the removal of pagan idols by Christian communities (p240). He concludes that these stones were subject to three distinct phases of activity, changing substantially in meaning and significance at each stage.

Staša Babič’s chapter on the long-term use of the cemetery of Novo Pazar, in Serbia, is a powerful theoretical treatise that breaks down rigid temporal brackets and instead looks at the overlapping and juxtaposed sequences – or accumulations of practices (p261) – evidenced at these graves. She urges archaeologists to engage in the multiple-temporal nature of the archaeological record and explore the connections between phases, otherwise we may divest previous events of their own pasts. I thoroughly agree with her important observations and hope they will influence the ways we think about multi-period sites in the future. The two final case-studies (Chapters 14 and 15) by Borja Legarra Herrero and Joan Sanmarti et al. focus on cemeteries in Crete and the Eastern Maghreb respectively. Herrero states that cemeteries may have been re-activated for political reinforcement or ancestor worship, but often such acts have been simply misinterpreted as tomb-robbing. Similarly, the re-use of the Magreb dolmen clusters in later periods may have been to create links with fictitious ancestors.

In Part Three, two chapters by Estella Weiss-Krejci and Richard Bradley touch upon some of the earlier points, and open up a fruitful broader discussion. Weiss-Krejci begins with an excellent summary of different cultural concepts of time. She then outlines the various ways the past may be re-appropriated, re-imagined and possessed. By employing several historical examples, she skillfully demonstrates this with the desire for burial next to illustrious ancestors. Bradley concludes the book with a thought-provoking chapter considering how some monuments may also have been built with the future in mind, and how we need to consider the nested pasts with the past and linkages between them. He discusses the intricate multi-temporal nature of monumental landscapes, illuminating this with a detailed summary of his recent excavations at the recumbent stone circle of Balnuaran of Clava.

The editors are to be commended for bringing together the diverse papers into a coherent volume and publishing it so promptly after the original conference session. Most chapters are beautifully illustrated by high quality black and white figures. It is well written and edited, which is all the more impressive given that English is not the native language of over half the contributors. This ambitious and broad-ranging book is an essential reference text for archaeologists, not only those interested in the long-term biographies of monuments. Important themes emerged from these contributions, including the timescales, rhythms, and episodic cycles of re-activation; few monuments witnessed unbroken continuity, and this will form a key research theme in years to come.

There are a few minor quibbles and this includes the fact that a wide circulation of this book may be hindered by its price tag. While this is understandably a collection of stand-alone contributions, a better-connected volume could have been attained if the editors had established more linkages between chapters. Some authors cite older publications when they could have cross-referenced the recent research from chapters within the book. Many of the monuments discussed in the various chapters began their lives in the Neolithic. As the aim of the book was to focus on the various roles they played from the Iron Age onwards, the Bronze Age is slightly neglected, although it is alluded to by a few authors, such as Cooney and Wheatley. Neolithic monuments also continued to hold relevance in the Bronze Age, and a more comprehensive understanding of their complex biographies might have been gained if their life-histories had been traced from their creation onwards. The reasons that certain monuments attracted renewed attention over time is well explicated. What is equally as fascinating, yet less fully explored, is why so many other monuments were subsequently closed off, forgotten, avoided or abandoned? One answer may lie in Salisbury’s opening chapter on the importance and ‘sacredness’ of natural places. While a few of the chapters consider the enmeshed relationships between monuments and their surroundings, often the monuments are discussed in relative isolation. Yet specific landscapes also have an important role to play in retaining the significance of monuments, not just the other way round.

The conclusions drawn in this book are that monuments do not have an afterlife – they continuously develop through re-interpretation, re-activation and re-working. A modern exception is one of the most famous monuments in Europe, perhaps the world – Stonehenge. Despite the rich biographical narrative that unfolded at this site over millennia, in recent decades it has been frozen in time and trapped behind a fence (Bender 1998). No longer allowed to evolve, it epitomises a fictionalised ideal site, yet it continues to play a highly relevant and active role as a popular visitor attraction, heritage symbol, political resource and cultural icon. Ironically, it is the surrounding landscape that has been transformed to recreate its ‘perfect’ setting, such as the removal of the road to Shrewton and the proposed re-routing or tunnelling of the A303. I wonder how archaeologists in the future will interpret this counter-situation where the monument remains static but its wider landscape has changed fundamentally.
Reference


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