



Book Reviews

HOUSES OF THE DEAD? NEOLITHIC STUDIES GROUP SEMINAR PAPERS 17, EDITED BY ALISTAIR BARCLAY, DAVID FIELD AND JIM LEARY

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The idea that Neolithic long barrows could be interpreted as 'houses of the dead', ultimately modelled on longhouses, has been around for some time. As several contributors to the volume point out, it goes back to Gordon Childe, was then popularised by Ian Hodder, and in one way or another it has lingered on. It is what scientists sometimes call 'elegant', in that it produces a pattern of such persuasive and pleasing simplicity that it seems a shame to be too finicky about it. But does it still stand up to scrutiny?

Most of the authors in this volume firmly answer 'no'. But not content with simply slaughtering this holy cow, they also show where this perhaps painful farewell to a long-loved idea will get us, and which new readings are possible. The book contains one introductory chapter, four papers on various continental regions, eight on the UK and Ireland (of which four on the Irish Sea area) and a concluding commentary.

In their introduction, the editors explain how the excavation of Cat's Brain long barrow inspired the Neolithic Studies Group session on which the volume is based. Cat's Brain has no human remains but some intriguing wooden elements, thus problematising interpretative links between long barrows, the dead, and the many kinds of timber structures documented for the Neolithic. Although the paper is somewhat impressionistic, jumping between detailed parallels and sweeping generalisations (eg, that the Neolithic is all about digging into the earth), and finally exhorting us that we should not 'uncritically utilise traditional explanations' (p.12) that strictly divide life and death, sacred and profane (but why are none of the classic papers on this already long-standing discussion quoted?), it does succeed in illustrating the diversity of architectural forms and of monument trajectories, thus creating room for a greater variety of interpretative approaches and setting the scene for the papers that follow.

We then move on to Malta, where Robert Barratt, Caroline Malone, Rowan McLaughlin and Eóin Parkinson have been involved in a very necessary project to finally identify the domestic record that stands alongside the impressive funerary structures and temples. While there are some architectural similarities between these contexts, it is mainly shared practices such as

rubbish disposal, cooking and eating that draw all these kinds of architecture into one system. The authors rightly react against the term 'temple' as implying an awed silence that almost certainly never reigned, but one could wonder whether their designation as a kind of 'club house' is not also unduly influenced by modern secular notions of equal access to leisure. Still, the main point is well made.

In her short, but persuasively argued paper, Joanna Pyzel traces the sequence from Linearbandkeramik longhouses to those of the Brześć Kujawski Group, which involves a significant hiatus. These later longhouses were not only very standardised, but also the setting for a variety of mnemonic activities, involving burials and other deposits, and therefore provide one of the few convincing links between houses for the living and Funnel Beaker long mounds for the dead. In contrast, Philippe Chambon systematically dismantles long-cherished ideas that either LBK/VSG longhouses or Mesolithic shell middens are direct antecedents for the first French monumental mounds. The architectural similarities which are frequently mentioned are too general, and cases of house–mound overlap are extremely rare. This is an important paper of the deconstructivist mould, based on a detailed command of the evidence, and leaving at least this reader with a vague sense of (probably necessary) disillusionment.

In the last continental paper, Penny Bickle argues that the connections between LBK longhouses and ancestry that have been proposed remain too abstract. Both architecture and settlement burial are varied practices, and if anything, their juxtaposition creates a view of LBK societies as living among the traces of a specific and recent past which served as concrete reference point for the living. A similar argument is also made by Alasdair Whittle, who discusses the often rather short-term memories that are implied in the siting of Early Neolithic monuments in Britain over, for instance, middens and other occupation traces. He also draws attention to the diversity of early monument forms and the concomitantly much wider range of possible inspirations we should consider for them. This is a concisely argued paper, but would have hugely benefitted from some form of illustration, such as site plans and sequences.

Roy Loveday takes a refreshingly practical approach to the question of timber mortuary 'houses' under long barrows by checking whether they could have been roofed structures. As their width exceeds even the largest Brześć Kujawski examples, as well as anything known from Britain at this time, and given various stratigraphic indications, he concludes that most timber structures were in fact revetments or other architectural embellishments contemporary with the erection of the mounds.

Keith Ray and Julian Thomas then summarise the exciting evidence of their excavations at Dorstone Hill with its complex sequence of the material from three burnt 'houses' being encased

in mounds, commemorated by cists and placed deposits, and finally joined into one large monument. The authors successfully stress a long, distinctly local history tied to the memories of a specific place – whether the main linkages materialised at Dorstone Hill are applicable elsewhere can, in the spirit of this volume, no longer be assumed.

In their paper on long barrows in Lincolnshire, Denise Drury and Tim Allen report on a large-scale project aimed at assessing the state of preservation of these fragile and threatened monuments. Aerial photography and LiDAR are combined with site visits, and finally selective geophysics and trial trenching. This effort at mapping and protection provides a valuable resource for future investigations and could already reveal that in this landscape at least, the dead and the living appear to have remained distinctly separate.

We then move on to the Irish Sea area, beginning with Jane Kenney's contribution on the relationship between a Neolithic timber house and a chambered tomb on Holy Island, Anglesey. Although the two structures do not overlap, they are intervisible, and the sequences of construction and use intriguingly seem to reference each other. Kenney rightly points out that to assess how frequent such mutual referencing may have been, it would be necessary to search and excavate much larger areas around mortuary monuments than is normally possible.

In the first of two papers on the Irish evidence, Jessica Smyth investigates the juxtaposition of a house and court tomb at Ballyglass. Again, such a clear link is not terribly frequent, and even here there is no direct mirroring between house and monument, showing that these kinds of associations were likely varied and complex. In contrast, Andrew Whitefield provides a provocative reading of the Irish 'house' evidence, in which he argues that the alleged domesticity of these structures is largely down to idealised images of an eternal peasant past that were deliberately generated at the time of Irish nation building. Most of the 'great men' of early Irish archaeology either entertained close ties to important political figures and/or were trained in a German-influenced brand of archaeology aimed at directly illustrating the roots of the nation. This paper is a ripping read and provides plenty of food for thought. Could there, for instance, be more varied uses of the Irish houses to discover if one conducted a more determined search for parallels in the broader Irish Sea area? However, the similarities between Irish houses and Scottish mortuary enclosures proposed by Whitefield remain rather superficial, the ample evidence for economic activities around the Irish house structures is not addressed at all, and a comprehensive critique of the sacred/profane dichotomy has in fact already been provided by Smyth in her seminal 2014 volume. Overall, then, this paper remains far less convincing than the more detailed criticism of Céide Fields by the same author, but could form an interesting starting point for further work. How much of this will be possible in an Irish archaeological setting, given the way Whitefield's 2017 paper was received, remains to be

seen. It is certainly interesting that even the colleague mentioned in the acknowledgements asked to remain anonymous.

Alison Sheridan then presents the evidence for Scotland, providing a concise and useful summary of her two suggested traditions, one (megalithic) with origins in Brittany and one with ultimate roots in the earthen mounds of Normandy, which entered Scotland via England. Although one wishes Sheridan would finally provide an example other than Achnacreebeag for the former, and although this reviewer at least is not so convinced about the wombs and rainbows angle of the paper, the contribution makes some excellent points. Sheridan (p.178) quite rightly points out that we must not be confused by archaeogeneticists' designations such as 'Iberian genes' turning up in Britain, which need not imply some direct connection to Iberia, certainly not before far more detailed evidence is available for the population history of France and the Low Countries. She also successfully establishes that tomb architecture may first and foremost serve the transition of the dead to the afterlife, rather than mirroring some elusive architecture of the living – a link which only really works on Orkney, and then not in the ways originally expected. Rather, the multiple sources of inspiration, the great variety in traditions and their subsequent inventive transformations are expertly drawn out.

In her insightful concluding commentary, Frances Healy summarises the key points emerging from the volume: life and death are not separate spheres in the Neolithic; we have been making too much of far too general similarities; and we have been lumping monuments by simple shape, rather than by architectural history or associated practices. Overall, what we see is not a close connection of houses and tombs, but a longer-term shift in where monumental effort is expended.

As a collection, these papers very forcefully stress the novelty, diversity and creative recombination that is involved in monument construction in the Neolithic. In most regions of Europe, the simplistic link between longhouses and long mounds no longer works, and rather than tracing passive reflections of ancestral veneration we are faced with multiple vibrant traditions, connected just enough to create visible large-scale phenomena such as long barrow building, but so diverse that they continue to surprise and challenge us. Because of its thematic unity and the range of case studies, this is a volume that will enrich the bookshelf of any Neolithic scholar.

One notable omission in the volume, and in several of the papers, is a clearer link to the northern German and southern Scandinavian material, which would have greatly benefitted discussion. For example, the subsuming of round mounds under a long one is interpreted by Sheridan as a sign of admixture between her Breton and Norman strands of Neolithisation. Yet

such sequences are also observed in Denmark, for instance at Strandby Skovgrave (Andersen 2016), where this narrative does not work. Similarly, the sequence from house to mound detailed in Ray and Thomas's contribution echoes examples such as Bygholm Nørremark in Denmark (Madsen 1979, 307; see also further examples in Andersen 2016) and Rastorf in northern Germany (Müller 2018, 14). While the volume's focus on local and regional diversity helps overcome the tired house/mound model in its traditional form, which assumed a social memory active over hundreds of miles and many centuries, there are still intriguing far-flung connections in the world of Neolithic monumentalism. With our new focus on more immediate connections, perhaps we instead too often think in terms of short-term colonisation movements and/or 'influences' from one defined point on the continent to a defined point in Britain or Ireland, connected by reassuringly simple one-way arrows. Monument form is therefore in danger of remaining a straightforward indicator of a definable identity, originating at a single point, and then taking roots and diversifying locally without further input from the outside.

This kind of view has helped us deal with the paradox of, on the one hand, a widely shared drive towards monument building and, on the other, the staggering local diversity it subsumes. But it is unlikely to reflect the way in which either mobility or long-distance borrowing and inspirations actually worked. Perhaps we could instead evoke something like a broader-scale interaction zone, with multiple, but less clear connections going on at several temporal scales, and with many routes towards shared practices and shared morphologies using creative recombinations, the whole thing maybe punctuated by occasional more regional or insular developments. Joanna Pyzel is the only contributor to mention such possibilities, in her case postulating connections between Poland and France, although we do not yet know what form these took. The enigmatic Michelsberg culture is likely to be crucial here, but the traditionally compartmentalised study regions, determined by years of disciplinary history, perhaps stand in the way of exploring this more fully. It is hoped that this volume and its spirit of opening up the debate to new and less orthodox interpretations will now be followed by others who take the baton even further.

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