



Book Reviews

MAKING A MARK: IMAGE AND PROCESS IN NEOLITHIC BRITAIN AND IRELAND BY ANDREW MEIRION JONES AND MARTA DÍAZ-GUARDAMINO

Oxbow Books, Oxford. 2019, 320pp, over 100 colour and black and white photographs, pb, ISBN 978-1789251883, £40.00

Current understanding of the lives of the Neolithic and Bronze Age communities who occupied the British Isles is heavily informed by the nature of their ritual monuments. These are an enduring and often dominant presence in the landscape, demanding attention and inspiring much debate about the beliefs of prehistoric societies and the symbolic architectural codes and decorative devices through which they were expressed and enacted. Rather less has been written about the ways in which the same communities also expressed ideas and values by marking the objects they fashioned from chalk, stone, antler, wood and pottery. These incised, engraved, pecked, and painted traces provide a powerful connection with the people who created them.

Focusing primarily on examples of decorated objects from the Neolithic period, *Making a Mark* – an output from the ‘Making a Mark’ project – takes a broad approach to the wide-ranging abstract visual imagery of Britain and Ireland. Digital imaging techniques and microscopy are applied to reveal the processes and practices at work across production, use and, significantly, re-working of the designs applied in a variety of contexts, primarily portable. These include figurines, maceheads, stone balls, slate plaques and, of course, the remarkable Folkton drums.

The authors develop a regional narrative, with examples from three key Neolithic centres: southern England and East Anglia; the Irish Sea region (Wales, the Isle of Man and eastern Ireland); and Northeast Scotland and Orkney. Situating the objects examined within an extended context, the authors examine relationships between art on portable objects and that on fixed surfaces, such as the megaliths of passage graves, and on outcrops and boulders in the open landscape. They reveal that, although objects were themselves moved between different contexts, the repertoire of designs applied to them remained relatively consistent. Further, the detailed analysis undertaken during the project exposed subtle layers of alteration and replacement. These were not static designs but were worked, erased, and re-worked multiple times by many generations.

The challenges of chronology are addressed with three, regionally distinct phases identified, beginning in the flint areas and chalk lands of southern England in the 40th century cal. BC. This is followed by an intensive burst of creativity between the 35th and 30th centuries cal. BC, centred on the Irish passage graves which, the authors argue, marks an increased period of inter-connectivity around the British Isles. A final phase of image-making is identified as beginning in Orkney around the 31st century cal. BC. This is associated with Grooved Ware pottery, with the chalk plaques and drums of southern and eastern England, and also with the emergence of depictions of the human figure and face.

The authors make one further assertion: it seems that the processes and practices of decorating portable objects, passage tombs, and settlements were distinct from those which produced the enigmatic visual imagery found in the open landscape: the cup-and-ring marked stones or open-air rock art scattered across many regions of Britain and Ireland. Most such examples are suggested to be created in a single phase with little evidence identified for re-working or superimposition, although it is acknowledged that future analysis of increasingly available digital recordings may demonstrate otherwise.

This is a well-produced and thoughtfully organised volume. The wide geographical and contextual scope works well, with technical approaches and object-centred, regional case studies woven together by both 'big picture' and human-scale analyses. The text is supported by numerous high quality illustrations, and enhanced by the inclusion of many images created using the technique of Reflectance Transformation Imaging. These pictures move us beyond aesthetics, affording a privileged, close-up view of the fine details of the marks under examination, and an appreciation of the skills in evidence: the physical motion and steady hand implied; perhaps even a glimpse of the patience and determination of the artist, if not their motivation or inspiration.

The book opens with an overview of the material evidence and an introduction to the wide-ranging contexts in which it is found. This is followed by a short chapter introducing the concept of time as a significant element in the study of Neolithic art. The authors draw on both anthropology and fine art to explore the processes involved in making art, and to demonstrate a fourth, temporal, component within these.

In Section Two (Chapters 3–9: 'The Archaeology'), we embark on an artistic and geological journey around Britain and Ireland with chapters focusing on specific regions and their associated artefacts, creating a picture of regionalised deployment of the art despite a shared design repertoire. This section ends with a valuable contribution from Antonia Thomas, who departs from the portable objects previously discussed to compare the artwork found on ritual

and domestic structures on the Ness of Brodgar, exposing a close link between the motifs and the practice of rebuilding.

Section Three (Chapters 10–12: ‘Relationalities’), moves into a more analytical and theoretical discussion of the evidence with three chapters in which Meirion Jones explores the replication of motifs across artefact types and contexts, developing a Neolithic ontology of the image, and considering the implications of this, and finally presenting ‘a minor narrative of Neolithic mark making practices which seeks to integrate art and imagery within the greater processes of the making of the Neolithic in Britain and Ireland. Previous interpretations of decorated objects as simply prestige items or symbols of power are replaced with more nuanced examination of the relationship built between maker and material, and the extended relationships implied with wider and more distant communities.

Section Four (Chapters 13–14: ‘Collaborations’) includes a very short reflection on the role of digital imagery followed a lengthy chapter by Ian Dawson and Louisa Minkin that explores the fine art collaborations built during the study. This provides an unexpected alternative voice and perspective, in the form of an account of the five year journey of the *Making a Mark* project itinerary, to museums, archives and landscapes. Although a stimulating countercontext, at 41 pages it is perhaps too much of a diversion from the main narrative.

In a final coda, Meirion Jones returns briefly to the fundamental issue of making things, exploring the relationship between figure and ground, and between maker and made. He argues that material substrates are active participants in the processes of drawing or carving, and so contribute to the birth of the artefact. Neolithic art, he asserts, is a tradition composed of enmeshed materials, actions and communities.

That visual imagery played a critical role across Neolithic society was never in doubt, but was perhaps little more than an unresolved assertion based on the prevalence of decoration throughout the archaeological record. By digging below the surface of the designs used, the tools employed and the processes surrounding the creation and deployment of decorated objects, Meirion Jones and Díaz-Guardamino have re-focused the subject with a much higher resolution, akin to that of their RTI images. The details are clearer and new subtleties are emerging. This is an important book which will surely make its own mark in the literature.

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