



Book Reviews

ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN NEOLITHIC ORKNEY BY ANTONIA THOMAS

Archaeopress Publishing Ltd., Oxford, 2016. 257pp, 170 col and B&W illus, pb ISBN 978-1-78491-433-2, £45.00

Neolithic Orkney has many superlatives. Who has not heard of Skara Brae, Maeshowe, or the ongoing excavations at the Ness of Brodgar? These sites form the basis for Antonia Thomas' doctoral research on the 'Art and Architecture in Neolithic Orkney' published as an affordable and attractive paperback with Archaeopress, and as an EPublication. Thomas' specific Orcadian superlative comprises the Neolithic decorated and dressed stones associated with these sites. Her survey of standing structures at Skara Brae and Maeshowe with different lighting techniques and detailed photography added 24 and 19 new artworks for each site respectively (p.5, p.226). At the Ness of Brodgar, her work tied in with the ongoing excavation and dismantling of the structures, which yielded over 700 artworks, of which about 200 were discovered *in situ* – 'the largest collection of architecturally-situated rock art in the UK' (p.153) – and, as at Skara Brae, not associated with burial contexts. The purely domestic function of these sites, however, may need further evaluation. Thomas' new record and analysis of this known and new material, presented in high detail and well-arranged, informative illustrations, render this book an important resource for anybody interested in Neolithic stone art. It also allows glimpses into the structural sequence and phasing at the Ness of Brodgar complex and thus provides a valuable contribution for understanding this as yet unpublished site.

The subtitle of the book 'Process, Temporality and Context', however, indicates that this is not a descriptive catalogue but an interpretive discourse into understanding the use of this art in the Neolithic from a particular theoretical background – and her findings here present further superlatives. The uniqueness of the Orcadian material renders it difficult to extrapolate to other stone and rock art, but Thomas' interpretations are relevant to the wider field of prehistoric art. Her method is not art-historical or semiotic; she is not interested in what this art means, but what it 'does', a perspective which fits into wider debates and in particular into current thinking about Iron Age art in Europe (eg, Joy 2011; Garrow & Gosden 2012; Romankiewicz 2018). This aspect is the reason behind this book review – to answer those raised eyebrows puzzled by an Iron Age specialist reviewing such a volume. This may excuse the lack of comment on the book's value to wider Neolithic studies.

The text is very emphatic and personal, with lots of italics, and similarly the photographs bring in the human dimension and actions, and the author herself. Thomas wants us to relate and engage with her work but also with the Neolithic artworks: she wants to convey movement and process, and thus her book becomes a metaphor for her theoretical interpretations and an artwork with agency in itself. This intimacy is perhaps not unexpected from a PhD, and her personal involvement on site at the Ness has clearly been the greatest benefit to Thomas' work. It has noticeably influenced her thinking, researching, and recording, and her understanding of the other sites under investigation.

For a non-specialist in the Neolithic like me, this deep involvement by the author makes a few aspects difficult to follow. The differences between the various methods of working stone could have been more clearly spelled out, perhaps in a tabular overview including all terms of working methods (illustration 27 depicts only those recorded on the three sites, but not all techniques mentioned in text). I fully support Thomas' move beyond categorization, yet if the differences between incising, intaglio, engraving, serrating, percussing, carving, etc. are deemed important enough to be described with different terms, this is not differentiated systematically enough at the beginning. I also would have liked to read more about the people behind these incisions and decisions and their varying degrees of intensity. Here, Thomas' analysis sometimes remains detached from those people behind, around and involved with this art.

Thomas emphasizes that the decorated stones often contain several layers of artwork of different techniques, which speak of processes and time depth. This layering complicates their documentation, but a full concordance of Thomas' new numbering against different existing ones may have helped to disentangle known and newly identified artworks, especially at Maeshowe where these stretch from the Neolithic through Norse to modern times (eg, p.67). Not all recorded work seems to have been depicted, and although Thomas hints at the existence of a catalogue (p.146), this has unfortunately not been included in the printed publication.

The surprise finding relates to the Ness of Brodgar. Decorated stones were not only incorporated into the walls and floors with their artwork permanently visible. Decorations were also found on stone faces covered up within the walls – visible only for a short time during construction. Thomas explores this point in depth concerning temporal and relational aspects and argues that these decorated stones were not reused but created to be hidden. As with Early Celtic Art, it is not just the seeing, but also the knowing and remembering that adds dimension to prehistoric artworks. However, the term 'decorated' is in itself problematic, as I have argued that from a relational perspective, artwork and object would be intrinsically conceived together and reactive to each other, whether as an original design or part of later added designs that mark change. This is not decoration, but 'the art becomes instrumental to the object, its ontology and life-history'

(Romankiewicz 2018, 57). While excavations at the Ness of Brodgar are still ongoing, new discoveries may stimulate Thomas to develop her current thinking even further – which she fully acknowledges and so highlights the importance of starting such theoretical analyses with the original data, and starting their analysis on site.

These findings form the basis of the discussion of Thomas' three key points, as she works sequentially from Process (Chapter 7) to Temporality (Chapter 8) and Context (Chapter 9). Here, she advocates an understanding of the art within concepts of relational ontology and draws on familiar names such as Ingold, Gosden, Tilley, Barrett, Richards, AM Jones, and others, as well as on Husserl, Heidegger, Bourdieu, and Gell. Within those chapters, it becomes clear just how entangled these aspects are. While seeking a threefold structure for clarity, Thomas' description under Process relates much to temporality and vice versa; both rely heavily on contextualization. In Context, she is focused on material and materiality (and less on architecture as I would have expected). Throughout, it becomes clear that these divisions are somehow artificial – as Thomas acknowledges – which highlights the appropriateness of her relational interpretation. From my architectural background, I would have appreciated a deeper examination of the architectural relations and interactions of these artworks, and a greater exploration not just of space, but also of volume. While she comments on light as a building material (in line with Bille & Sørensen 2007), she is less concerned about how much light would have been allowed into passages and interior spaces (naturally and artificially), which would have also depended on roof constructions and the permeability of openings relating to (lost) organic materials. To that extent, Thomas remains non-committal regarding the reconstruction of the buildings at the Ness of Brodgar and also Skara Brae. The focus remains on construction and deconstruction as inferred from the surviving stone walls, perhaps because these are the best understood processes, while the use of these structures remains much more difficult to define.

A strong narrative of process dominates throughout, and may perhaps be a reflection of the times when this PhD work was started. While she acknowledges that 'construction is not performance – but it may be performative' (p.178, citing Richards *et al.* 2013, 120), one author in this context is surprisingly absent from Thomas' comprehensive bibliography: Karen Barad, and her philosophy of performative ontology and intra-actions between matter, material and materiality (2007; compare Marshall & Alberti 2014 for archaeological applications). From my architectural perspective, Thomas' interpretation can appear at times too focused on process alone, on constant flux, underestimating the relative inertness (or slowness) of matter and form, and any interruptions by events (Lucas 2008). I would lean towards investigating this tension between process and event especially in an architectural context. These are, however, details to argue about and should not distract from the fact that Thomas' overall approach and conclusion is such

a rich and refreshing change from methods focusing on style, symbolism and semiotics and from valuing its consideration of art as embodied practice (compare Chittock & Valdez-Tullett 2016). It turns out that this review has become as personally involved as Thomas' own work. But beyond what this book 'does' for me, I am sure that the specialist as well as those with a general interest in Neolithic art will find a wealth of data, and an interesting proposition of how to engage and interpret this art today. Readers will get a glimpse on its context and agency at the time the art was created, used, reused, hidden, and lost – and at the time of its rediscovery.

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