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DECODING NEOLITHIC ATLANTIC AND MEDITERRANEAN ISLAND RITUAL

EDITED BY GEORGE NASH AND ANDREW TOWNSEND

Oxbow Books. 2016. 304 pages, 148 figures, 10 tables. ISBN 978-1-78570-050-7. Hb (£50.00)

Islands have long been fascinated archaeologists. Whether this is because many are nice places to work, or because their geographical scale and boundedness provide a sense of attainable completeness, or because their separation makes comfortable conceptual categories for analysis is far from clear. More certain is that they have provided study areas for scholars working within a wide range of theoretical frameworks, and with both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. This book usefully adds to the already extensive body of literature on island-based archaeology, focusing on eleven islands or island groups right around Europe's maritime fringe from Gotland in the southern Baltic to Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean. Being expressly concerned with the Neolithic period and with ritual gives an interesting and innovative slant to the work, but is not without its problems. Using the legacy of late nineteenth century AD thinking about technological and social evolution implicit in the idea of the 'Neolithic' means that what is discussed ranges in actual date from around 8000 BC in Cyprus to 3500 BC in Gotland. Thus although these societies were, arguably, at similar stages of technical development and social complexity they lived in very different worlds in terms of their environment and their wider social relations with neighbouring groups. Not surprisingly, therefore, the 'rituals' forming the second articulating theme are very different in character, something that makes navigating the assemblage of case studies both interesting and frustrating.

The editors get the volume off to a good start with a straightforward introduction emphasizing that islands are more than just lumps of rock in the sea. They summarize a little of the history of island-archaeology research, rehearsing the two commonly used perspectives that variously see islands as either laboratories through which to explore 'cultural experiments' or as insular places where strange things happen. Contextualizing the core chapters that follow, they pose, as key questions, the definition of 'ritualized universal constructs' and the issue of whether 'these constructs moved across the Neolithic world as a set of ideas that had their origins for both Mediterranean and Atlantic Seaboard in the eastern Mediterranean?' (p.xv).

Given the questions posed it seems odd that the chapters are ordered broadly from north to south, starting in the Baltic and ending in the Mediterranean. But that's how it is. Moreover, rather irritatingly, some chapters dealing with the same island group are not set back to back,

and in the second half of the book the order in which islands are treated seems pretty random (and not exactly the order considered below).

Starting then in the north, Wallin and Martinsson-Wallin focus on middle Neolithic Pitted Ware Culture cemeteries on Gotland. These hunter-fisher communities, sandwiched between the earlier Funnel Beaker Culture groups who built megalithic tombs and the late Neolithic farming groups that buried their dead in cist-graves, seemingly asserted their identity through associations with animals and the removal of selected body-parts from graves. Across the North Sea, Kern's study of Orkney uses GIS to examine spatial and, by implication, social relationships between settlements and chambered tombs. Great attention is rightly paid to modelling the chronologies and contemporaneity of the sites examined, although the conclusion that the evidence is explained by 'a complex network of interrelationships between social action, memories and cosmology that is not expressed solely by singular events, but through long term historical processes' (p.49) feels like a giant interpretative leap after the author has slogged through the detail of several extensive datasets.

Staying amongst the British Isles, Robinson reviews the Neolithic archaeology of Anglesey, rather cheekily noting that for most of the Neolithic it wasn't an island at all in the conventional sense. His conclusion that its monuments represent an extension of patterns seen on the adjacent coastlands of northwest Wales is obvious in the circumstances. Changing sea-level is also relevant to Waite's study of the Scillonian entrance graves that originally stood on hilltops within a few large islands rather than scattered over the host of tiny islands forming the archipelago seen today. This thoughtful account deals well with a difficult and poorly understood group of monuments, slotting fairly neatly into the pattern of localized tomb-building traditions in very late third millennium BC that also includes the Clava Cairns and Bargrennan Cairns of Scotland. A second paper on the Isle of Scilly by Kirk takes a slightly different view, reclassifying some of the entrance graves as passage graves to push their origins back into the fourth millennium BC and forge close links with northern France. It's an attractive idea, but where is the associated material culture that might be expected?

Three chapters deal with aspects of the Neolithic in the Channel Islands off the coast of Normandy. Driscoll focuses on the Final Neolithic across the island group as a whole documenting divergences of tradition from ancestral homelands on the adjacent mainland that he relates to inter-island ritual competition. Nash describes his investigations of a megalithic monument in Delancey Park, Guernsey, confirming that it was a gallery grave similar to examples in northern France and beyond. His approach focuses on architectural qualities, in contrast to Jelly whose study of megaliths in northern Guernsey uses GIS to pursue a phenomenological approach. This suggests changing local preferences for sea-views, most common amongst monuments of the later Neolithic.

Jumping non-stop around the Iberian peninsula to the warmer waters of the Mediterranean the next port of call is amongst the Adriatic Islands off the Dalmatian coast. Kaiser and Froenbahr describe their work in the Grapčeva Cave which they interpret as a mortuary ritual site where feasts, offerings, and secondary burials took place, thereby producing and reproducing memories, during the fifth millennium BC. Similar themes are explored in a more theorized way by Lutescu-Jones in relation to burial practices in Cyprus in the period 8500 BC to 5500 BC in which memories of where people had been contributed to how they shaped and transformed their physical world in order to make the two fit together in a unified cosmological scheme.

Returning to the central Mediterranean Peatfield's review of ritual and religion on Crete tries to escape the shadow of events during the Minoan Bronze Age to focus on the period from 7000 BC to 3500 BC when Knossos seems to have been the only major

settlement. Figurines, many in residual contexts, provide a key line of evidence and are used to support the idea of religion within a household context rather than a broader community activity. Intimate relations between settlements and rock-cut tombs in Copper Age Sicily leads Wexler to propose a similar household focus here too, suggesting that ‘people would repeatedly return to [cemeteries] to renew, recreate, and maintain their social relationships and social order in a world that was becoming increasingly domesticated and territorial’ (p. 199). Taken together, the conclusions of these two papers coupled with evidence from other parts of the eastern Mediterranean shows that further work on the relationship between ritual activity and domestic contexts might be extremely worthwhile.

Two papers discuss aspects of the rich Neolithic cultural sequence on Malta. Grima considers the Ғal Safflieni Hypogeum on the outskirts of modern Valletta, suggesting that geological considerations were amongst the reasons that this and other massive underground burial places were created. In the Neolithic mindset, he argues, ‘the shaping of spaces between and around geological features was a form of exploration of the underworld, and crossing through those features was a form of cosmological travel into the realm of the dead’ (p.212). It’s an interesting approach, and one that might be expanded to include analysis of former underground watercourses, springs, and groundwater pools. Rather different is Townsend’s study of figurines from ‘temple sites’ and the hypogeum. Based on some neat observations he argues that interest in cycles of birth, life and death can be linked to the way images are dressed, with portable figurines often nude, statuettes either nude or partly clothed, and large statues partly or fully clothed.

Wilkinson and colleagues discuss shifting Neolithic settlement patterns in relation to evidence for environmental change and vegetation history on Corsica. While interesting in its own right, and an excellent summary of important fieldwork, there is no discussion of any relationships to ritual activities and one is left wondering why it was included. Finally, in a delightfully illustrated paper, Arosio and colleagues consider the rock-cut tombs of Corsica known as *Domus de Janus* or Houses of the Fairies. These underground structures are internally carved to replicate the walls, floors, roofs and fittings of contemporary houses, part of a wider tradition in the central Mediterranean that also includes the hypogea of Malta. Rock-art and painted decoration is also present, including spiral motifs found widely across northwestern Europe during the fifth to third millennium BC. As houses for the dead, these tombs are seen as staging posts on the journey between life and the afterlife, places for the transition from being someone to being something.

Overall, the 24 authors contributing to these 17 chapters bring to bear a wide range of perspectives around the central themes, varying in their theoretical standpoints and their engagement with the philosophical issues surrounding the understanding of ritual. At one level the book works as a useful compendium of case-studies that provide solid summary accounts of recorded ritual sites and monuments in a series of snap-shots from interesting islands. Readers can dip into these as they wish as they might any reference book. But as a study of Neolithic ritual in island contexts it leaves this reviewer wanting more. The reader has to do the work in stitching it all together, teasing out the patterns, and posing questions as few of the papers really nail the stated purpose of the book. Most contributions focus on monuments as structures rather than ritual as a set of actions. How can we move beyond the monuments to consider ritual activity, behaviour, and intentions? Where are the cognitive dimensions of ritual really discussed? And are there any common strands in the way that early farming communities in different environments and circumstances articulated their beliefs and cosmologies? One might reasonably ask why they all appear so different when diffusion models and the recent evidence from aDNA and language studies point to fairly high levels of homogeneity amongst related early farming groups. A concluding chapter by the editors that returned to address the questions posed in their introduction would have

satisfactorily rounded the volume off. Perhaps this never happened because, sadly, Andrew Townsend died while the book was in the making. If so, it is a loss that also provides an opportunity. Most of the papers here underline the starting proposition that every island is different; a finding that could perhaps provide a starting point to confirm or refute in the next round of island-based Neolithic archaeologies.

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