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VESSELS FOR THE ANCESTORS

Harry Fokkens*

For many archaeologists the Neolithic of Britain is equivalent with the Neolithic of southern England, in particular Wessex. That the Scottish archaeological inheritance is no less impressive and deserves much more attention than it has had so far, is proved by the survey of Scottish (and some Irish) Neolithic data presented in *Vessels for the Ancestors* edited by Niall Sharples and Alison Sheridan. The book is dedicated to Audrey Henshall, one of the pioneers of Scottish Neolithic research, on the occasion of her 65th birthday. The hard-cover edition is expensive, but those who want to know more about the Neolithic outside Wessex, should buy a copy, especially if they are interested in Neolithic tombs.

It must have been difficult for the editors to find a structure for the book. The solution is found in grouping the contributions into four main areas of interest: Funerary Studies, Decorated Stones, Artifact Studies and Regional Studies. They represent, as the editors explain in their introductory chapter, 'the central issues facing Neolithic studies in Scotland'. This does not imply that there is no interest in settlement studies for instance, simply that there is marked lack of data on settlements.

Sharples and Sheridan recognise four traditional approaches to the study of Neolithic Scotland: the site oriented approach, the regional study, the national-based study and the artifact-type or resource-based study. There is a lack of synthetic studies and only hesitatingly are current theoretical approaches applied to the Scottish Neolithic; the present volume mirrors these trends.

Almost half of the book is dedicated to the study of funerary structures, i.e. cairns and other megalithic structures. This illustrates one of the biases of Scottish archaeology: 'the incomplete and uneven nature of the database' as the editors call it (p. 5). Almost all the writers complain about the lack of research in Scotland, as compared to Orkney, notably of mesolithic and neolithic settlements. *Vessels for the Ancestors*, therefore is focused on the mainland, without letting Orkney out of sight as a base for comparison.

It is very difficult to review a book like

Vessels for the ancestors as it has 23 chapters in its 366 pages, written by authors with very different backgrounds. I will briefly summarize and comment on articles in the order they were arranged in the volume, because it is difficult to group the contributions in any other way.

Before proceeding with this review, I want to make my own background clear in order to enable the reader to judge my opinions; too many reviews are presented as objective statements, which they are of course not. I do not consider myself a structuralist, processualist, post-processualist or post-modernist. I am more or less an eclectic. I have read most of the modern theoretical literature, and scholars like Appadurai, Bourdieu, Giddens, Habermas and Lévi-Strauss – to name a few – have my sympathy, but more often than not I dislike the way in which archaeologists embrace (one of) them as their prophet of a new religion. I feel that one has to use these approaches critically and not because it is fashionable; that kind of attitude only produces clones.

After the introductory chapter the editors, *Vessels for the ancestors* starts with an interesting account by John Barber of the possibilities and constraints of megalithic architecture. In his opinion 'the architecture of cairns was also that of the contemporaneous domestic sites' (p. 30). An intriguing statement is Barber's denial of the idea that the architecture of chambered tombs should reflect the liturgical (i.e. ritual) practices of their users. Monuments that remain open to use for hundreds of years will undergo changes in meaning and eventually become part of a mythical landscape. That may, for instance, explain more about Beaker burial in megalithic tombs, a feature that is consistent in large parts of Europe, than to consider them a mere continuation of their use as (collective) burials.

In the next chapter, Jane Murray explains why Bargrennan cairns should be considered a short-lived small regional group rather than a hybridisation between Clyde tombs and Orkney-type passage graves. This is, in my opinion, a better approach than to try and connect all monumental types into one evolu-

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tionary scheme, as is done so often. Murray's arguments for the Bargrennan group seem convincing to me, but I'm not an expert on Scottish Neolithic tombs. However, where I become restless, is Murray's small exposé of the social and symbolic significance of the Bargrennan cairns. As she states it, the cairns themselves give no indication of an hierarchical structure of the society who built them (p. 45). Nevertheless, Murray uses Bradley's idea, borrowed from Bourdieu and Foucault, that the knowledge 'of modes current among other power systems' are involved in cairn building and serve to reproduce some sort of power over ritual. The fact that there are no later activities at or near Bargrennan cairns is therefore interpreted as 'a failure of the Bargrennan ritual to maintain power over succeeding generations' (p. 45). This is a forced way to bring the theories of Bourdieu, Foucault and Habermas into the play, just because it is fashion, and does not bring us any further. In itself, power structures do not explain the building of monumental tombs. They may only explain some aspects of the ritual involved, but they cannot be raised as the sole explanation for – in this case – the disappearance of the Bargrennan cairn tradition. Many archaeologists using these theories – and this is most clearly to be seen in Julian Thomas' work – translate every aspect of culture into power structures and use them subsequently as an explanation for almost anything. They ignore many other aspects of culture that undoubtedly have played a part as well, notably economy, and (physical and social) environment. Although Bourdieu's and Habermas' views on the structure of our society and scientific thinking are undoubtedly plausible, I would not go as far as explaining everything that happens in our society, and the choices we make, especially not in burial ritual, in terms of power struggles. Why should we then do so for prehistoric communities?

In chapter 4, Roger Mercer studies the megalithic tombs in Caithness. In his opinion the tradition of cairn building starts first in Caithness with the heel-shaped cairns in three nodal areas: the Thurso/Forss river area, followed by the Wick River and Dunbeath basins. Only after that initial phase does monument building start in Orkney. Mercer sees cumulative structures as a second phase, followed by long cairns with horns, later superimposed by circular cairns. The last phase is that of the short horned cairns. What

surprised me is that the nodal areas of cairn building are merely explained as good points of access from the sea. This implies that the Neolithic colonists landed their boats and immediately started building settlements and cairns on the very spot of their landfall. It is more or less a view of Neolithic settlers with the sixteenth and seventeenth century European colonisation of the New World as a metaphor. In that case hostile primitives and fate determined the location of the colonies. An approach like this gives no credit to the intelligence of Neolithic people and their capability of choosing a place for living with more than one thing in mind: settling down.

The next chapter is written by Colin Richards, one of the people who has learned to use theory critically. His contribution has no explicit references to Bourdieu, Giddens or Foucault, but one can sense that they are present somewhere in the background. Justly, Richards does not need to cite them in order to give his study of the cosmology of the Orkney-Cromarty chambered tombs more credibility. Richards explains that the O-C chambered tombs should not so much be seen as a series of chambers, but as a series of doorways leading towards the tall-end stone, a metaphor for a pathway into another world that always will be closed to humanity. On the outside the tombs are constantly modified and rebuilt (see Mercer's cumulative stages) until the chambers themselves were blocked and the mound itself becomes – in its linear form – the embodiment of the pathway. This abstract does no justice to the article, because only that – as a narrative – creates the right atmosphere to 'understand' the processes involved; just read it!

In a short contribution, Gordon Barclay tries to shed more light on Clava 'passage graves', a small group of cairns in eastern Scotland. The problem is that there is hardly any evidence that the passages of these graves have been roofed, although most authors have assumed that this was the case. Barclay thinks that they may have been used in only one burial event and for only a limited period of time. In his summary he calls them 'hybrid monuments combining characteristics and traditions of the monuments to the north and the west with those to the east and the south'. Again, this is a denial of the ability of Neolithic people to think and act independently.

Ian Kinnes analyses a group of forty-nine non-megalithic barrows, including long

barrows, round barrows, flat graves and cave burials. From Kinnes' survey it is evident that parallel to the megalithic tradition, both in space and in time, a non-megalithic tradition existed with an equally wide diversity of grave forms. Dates, both absolute and relative, are, however, uncertain. No non-megalithic long barrow is dated before 3000 BC, and Kinnes rightly does not want to come to the easy conclusion, phrased by many authors before him, that the non-megalithic monuments come first in an evolutionary schema. Evolution in itself does not explain anything (p. 103).

J. G. Scott writes an interesting chapter about 'mortuary structures and megaliths'. Scott has reanalysed excavation reports and has, rather convincingly, arrived at the conclusion that there is evidence for the presence of raised mortuary platforms in several megalithic monuments. These platforms were supported by two or more large split tree trunks or posts and may have stood until they eventually collapsed, or were removed when a burial chamber was built on top of the underlying pavement. The latter process is seen by Scott as having taken place at, for instance, Wayland's Smithy.

George Eogan compares, in his contribution, Scottish and Irish passage tombs. It is one of these terrible stories – of which happily only few examples are still written – of the way in which several types of tombs influenced other types of tombs. In this case the main conclusion is that there is 'no clear-cut [typological] development from Clyde tombs to passage tombs' in Scotland and therefore passage tombs are either 'a new invention, introduction, or stimulation from outside'. Of course, Eogan chooses influences from Ireland as the origin for the 'invention' of Scottish passage graves. About the ritual or social processes that may have invoked these changes and the reasons for the Scots to look at Ireland for this exciting new invention, of course no thoughts are formulated. Since they implicitly use human reproduction as a metaphor for cultural processes, for people like Eogan the ultimate new tool would probably be a DNA test for artifacts and monuments.

Gabriel Cooney has an entirely different approach to Irish Neolithic mortuary processes. Using four specific examples of excavated sites, Cooney distinguishes several phases in mortuary ritual. The first stage involves the preparation of the burial site as a special and sacred place by burning the ground

or constructing 'a defined architectural space'. Secondly the site is used for the processing and deposition of human remains. In this respect megalithic monuments can be seen as ossuaries. Thirdly the burial place is closed. Cooney is of the opinion that the way in which the bones of age and sex groups are disposed, tells us several things about the community that buried them. For instance, in Fourknocks and Millin Bay, the bones of children and adolescents occur largely as a collective deposit, while adults are often formally buried. In his view this may be the result of an idealised concept of community in which children did not figure in a major way (p. 141). Cooney's analysis takes this point a little further, which I find an interesting approach. But one of the problems, noted also by John Barber in chapter 2, is that the archaeological record, especially in collective tombs, can be the result of hundreds of years of use. The structures that Cooney has observed, may well be distorted and not representative of one community at all.

'Monument, movement, and the context of megalithic art' is the title of Julian Thomas' paper. His approach is based on a parallel 'between constructed space and written text' (p. 143). Landscape and monuments are treated as texts written on the landscape, the problem is how to read them. Thomas' contribution revolves around the concept of movement through space. Almost as in a motion picture, he tries to visualise what happens if a procession of people moves through a ritual landscape on their way to a particular monument. There is a the ritual leader, who (of course?) heads the procession and enters the tomb first. He turns around and faces the crowd, the procession stops, and he – as the only one, since it is invisible to the others – sees a symbol on the lintel of the tomb. This gives him an advantage over the others. Moving further inside, possibly a process of a lifetime of initiation, he finally is able to understand the whole 'grammar' of the symbolism involved in megalithic ritual. In that respect the tomb is seen as 'a weapon in the struggle to assert and maintain a sectional interpretation of reality' (p. 154). My critique, on the interpretation of megalithic ritual as a form of power struggle, goes for Thomas' article as well. Moreover, his arguments often take the form of: 'one can easily image that...'. True, but one can just as easily imagine that not..., and where does that leave us with this type of explanation by imagination. Citing Bourdieu does not make it more

credible in my opinion.

A small part of the book, part 2, centres on decorated stones. In chapter 12, Frances Lynch tries to find out from where the spiral-decorated stone, found behind the altar in a church at Llanbedr, originated from. Her conclusion is that it may have come from an isolated grave in the neighbourhood, but the provenance remains uncertain.

In the next chapter, Richard Bradley observes that many already-carved (Neolithic) stones were incorporated in Bronze Age burial monuments, notably with the carving towards the inside of the chamber and the dead. The stones originally occupied a prominent place in the landscape and were the mark of an earlier generation. Since only a selection of symbols was used in this way, Bradley suggests that there still existed some knowledge of their meaning, which by their removal and reversed application in the burial, was transferred to the past, in relationship with the dead. 'Messages inscribed on a landscape that was already receding into myth were relayed exclusively to the ancestors' (p. 176). Bradley's idea that the use of older symbols were part of a specific ritual, is an interesting one and deserves attention. One can of course debate whether the meaning of these symbols was still known. The Llanbedr stone was found behind an altar in a church and presumably was also part of a similar ritual. In this case probably one of victory over evil spirits or heathen beliefs. The two types of decorated stones in Lynch and Bradley's contribution have, in my opinion, much in common with respect to the interpretation of their final find-spot.

Part 3 is dedicated to artifacts, their dating, distribution and meaning. The meaning of stone artifacts is 'sometimes wholly unknown' says Mark Edmonds in his paper about carved stone balls of the Late Neolithic. These could have been mace heads, *bolas*, or have had a symbolic function. Edmonds stresses that, in order to understand them better, we have to look at their context. Since no specific context is apparent, it appears that they may have served a role in maintaining and reproducing 'the new forms of authority and obligation which characterised the Later Neolithic' (p. 191). In other words they were some kind of prestige symbols, although that word is evaded by Edmonds. Instead, he names them 'items which objectified ideas about identity, status and affiliation of the individual' (p. 192). This type of descriptive language typifies Edmonds

writing and sometimes it makes this reader stare hopelessly at the ceiling, especially since the point of the article is essentially straight forward. It could have been much more clear and convincing if less eloquence had been used.

Quite different in composition is Alison Sheridan's paper about Scottish stone axe-heads. It is a material publication of excellent quality. Her study shows that petrological analysis of Scottish stone axes is well under way and can produce good results. Sheridan specifically comments on the work done at the Creag na Caillich rock source. Axes from this type of stone have a thin but extensive distribution, which poses questions as to the mechanism of distribution, *i.e.* the exchange network in which they circulated.

Roy Ritchie's contribution covers a similar subject. He discusses the distribution of stone axes and cushion maceheads from Orkney and Shetland. A striking difference is that the axes from Shetland are – on average – much larger than Orcadian specimens; a large number measures well over 20 cm long. Ritchie attributes this to a difference in life style and wonders 'why early Shetlanders needed such large axeheads' (p. 214). Scandinavian colleagues dealing with the same kind of material, for instance Nielssen (1977) and Højlund (1974), would probably answer that, in their area, axes over 20 cm in size are only found in depots. Since – according to Ritchie – many of the Shetland axes are unused, it might be worthwhile to examine the hypothesis that in Shetland ritual deposition is involved, while this is to a lesser extent the case in Orkney. Analysis of the context of deposition should be one of the points of departure in any future study.

Derek Simpson and Rachel Ransom also discuss maceheads, but limit their analysis to those from Orkney. Here they have a wide distribution with seventy-six examples known. These are often broken, which prompts the authors to say that ritual activity may have been involved in their destruction as tools. A strange suggestion if one sees how large the shaft holes often are. If their function had anything to do with pounding, breakage would have to be high.

Ann Clarke describes several types of artifacts made of coarse stone. She comments on the resources exploited and the artifacts' functions, which are sometimes evident from the context. However, when discussing the Skaill

knives for instance, it is apparent that better interpretations could result from micro-wear analysis. The scepticism about this type of analysis is widely spread, but not entirely founded. Critical use of the method can produce results (Van Gijn 1990).

Ann MacSween studied Orcadian grooved ware; a useful study of Neolithic pottery, especially since she used a settlement complex (the Pool settlement) as a basis. She distinguishes an early round based Phase I, evolving in flat base Phases II and III, based on differences in temper, form and decoration. The position of Orcadian grooved ware in relation to the rest of Britain remains unclear. Orcadian grooved ware is dated some 900 years earlier than in southern England, where the dates centre around 2000 BC. Evidently, contrary to what most people think, the two traditions were not related to each other, at least not in the direct sense.

Trevor Cowie describes Neolithic pottery from Barbush Quarry. His approach is different from MacSween's in the sense that it is a very descriptive study and therefore extremely boring to read. Even the Munsell colours of the sherds have been recorded, a semi-objective method of description that I thought to have become extinct at least 10 years ago. Alas, in some museums it still seems to exist.

An interesting attempt at pottery classification is carried out by Rosamund Cleal. Although the schematas are almost incomprehensible, Cleal tries to quantify forms in a way that deserves attention in pottery typology. Her plea for standardisation is justified, although I disagree with her when she implies that this could improve our understanding of pottery (p. 303). Also the assumption that 'our perception of the pots we study are relevant to the understanding of "folk classification"' (p. 288) is rather naive. Even without citing Hodder, it is clear that we cannot study pottery as mere objects. The context of use is of unequivocal importance if we want to make inferences about the function and symbolic use of pottery.

In part 4 two regional studies are presented. Ian Armit describes a few Hebridean island settlements. A very interesting study if one considers his data to be only the tip of the iceberg. A rather clear picture of housing, stratigraphy and economy emerges, although much remains to be analysed and in more detail.

In the concluding chapter Niall Sharples

overviews the regional data, using Orkney as a point of departure. One conclusion is that the different aspects of culture show much regional diversity and that it is therefore almost impossible to distinguish discrete regional groups (p. 322). According to Sharples the main patterns that can be seen on Orkney are:

1. Primary settlement is expected outside the main areas of mesolithic occupation;
2. Concentrations of tombs emerge in landscapes where light soils capable of supporting agricultural practices were restricted;
3. Complicated Late Neolithic communities developed in landscapes which may have been unsuitable for early agriculturalists.

Using these broad patterns, Sharples surveys the west coast of Scotland and concludes that they occur everywhere, but not necessarily in the same form. A flaw in his arguments is the use of population pressure as an explanation for monument building. Why should 'the construction of ever larger tombs' have kept increasing pressure on resources in check (p. 327)? Without a specific reference, Sharples endorses here Chapman's (1981) concept of formal disposal, which I have become sceptical of since it is too one-dimensional and functionalist.

In conclusion I want to note one or two general points of criticism of *Vessels for the ancestors*, which as a whole is a valuable source of information about the Scottish Neolithic and also shows the first attempts at a more theoretical approach. Firstly, it is regrettable that most authors have not used any maps. It is assumed that the reader will know all the places and regions mentioned. A standard map, provided by the editors to indicate which region is being written about, would have been convenient. Secondly, it is regrettable that so much attention, in the articles on megalithic tombs, is still devoted to the search for parallels and origins. This gives the impression that Neolithic people spent much of their life looking at and imitating other Neolithic people. Similarly, the explanation of immigration as a source of innovation is too easily accepted. Especially since hardly anything is known about Mesolithic habitation. One should not approach these questions with only one explanatory model. On the continent the immigration model has been discarded for most of the observed culture changes, even if they were as sharply defined as the start of megalithic monument building. Maybe after

careful examination, the model will hold its value, but most authors seem to use it as an *a priori* assumption. As Sharples notes in his concluding chapter, we should try to explain regional developments much more in their local setting, looking at 'environmental, social and cultural constraints' (p. 330). Maybe that could be one of the focus points for future research.

Volume Reviewed:

Sharples, NM and Sheridan, A 1002 *Vessels for the Ancestors: Essays on the Neolithic of Britain and Ireland in honour of Audrey Hanshell*, Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, ISBN 0 7486 0341 7, 366pp. £45.

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TIMBER CASTLES

*J. Huggett**

The stated purpose of this book is 'to restore timber castles to their rightful place in the history of fortification; to show that they were not temporary versions of stone castles, but were formidable strongholds which dominated their surrounding landscapes, sometimes for centuries' (p. 11). To a large extent, it succeeds admirably in this intent. Indeed it would be hard to imagine a pair of authors better equipped to write such a book. One only has to compare this weighty volume (390 pages in all) to the short shrift given to timber castles by other recent castle studies. For example, M.W. Thompson in his *The Rise of the Castle* (1991) devotes fourteen pages to timber castles which are seen as either temporary structures or the precursors of stone castles (Thompson 1991, 59–62). As far as T. McNeill's *The English Heritage Book of Castles* (1992) is concerned, timber castles might as well not have existed at all.

After an introductory chapter discussing the study and background of timber castles, the book gets under way with a chapter on the *Origins of Timber Castles in the British Isles*. England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland are examined individually and several fundamental questions raised (but not answered). Is there independent development of castles within regions or can sites only be viewed as castles once they are more strictly comparable with those elsewhere? Can a castle be defined by its physical characteristics or is social

context the primary criterion, with the physical attributes simply the by-product of available technology and building tradition? (p. 38). While Barker and Higham seem to allow for independent invention, to a considerable extent they rely on physical characteristics to define their sites. The English section is perhaps confused by an apparent desire to apply a 'counterfactual' approach in which it is suggested that the Norman influence might be stripped from early twelfth century England and then this suggestion refuted in the same breath. As a result, the discussion of Anglo-Saxon 'castle-like' creations is muddled by a backward-looking approach from the Norman evidence rather than a clear-sighted appraisal of the evidence of Anglo-Saxon fortification in its own right. Despite statements to the contrary, the castle is still essentially being viewed in a Norman light. The argument is essentially one of definition and scale hence, for example, the Anglo-Saxon defences at Sulgrave are described as 'slight compared with those of the Norman period' (p. 51) and thus not considered castle-like. If a Norman-derived scale and definition are adopted, it is unsurprising that evidence for comparable sites in the late Anglo-Saxon period is largely absent. The Welsh evidence is slighter still, and weakened by any reliance on the rectangular earthworks such as Cwrt Llechrhyd and Mathrafal which, contrary to the claims in this

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