

Review article

Breaking away: identity and society in Scotland's Neolithics

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KENNETH BROPHY, GAVIN MACGREGOR & IAN B.M. RALSTON (ed.). *The Neolithic of mainland Scotland*. 2016. xvii+322 pages, numerous b&w illustrations, 4 tables. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; 978-0-7486-8573-8 paperback £19.99.

COLIN RICHARDS & RICHARD JONES (ed.). *The development of Neolithic house societies in Orkney*. 2016. xx+572 pages, numerous colour and b&w illustrations. Oxford & Havertown (PA): Windgather; 978-1-9096868-9-2 hardback £35.



Characterising the Neolithic in Britain and Ireland has always been a lively pursuit. Following

the referendums on Scottish independence and Brexit, and the consequent shifts in modern cultural and political identities, research into the first farming communities of these islands and their tangled traditions assumes particular resonance. The two volumes under review explore Neolithic identities in Scotland: the first, a *festschrift* for Gordon Barclay, focused around the theme of mainland Scotland; the second, a monograph pulling together more than two decades of fieldwork led by Colin Richards and colleagues around the Bay of Firth in Orkney.

The 12 contributions in *The Neolithic of mainland Scotland*, arranged by the editors into three sections ('Scotland's mainland Neolithic in context', 'Non-megalithic monuments' and 'Pits, pots and practice'), aim to address aspects of Barclay's varied interests or, as one contributor phrases it, his "*bêtes noires*" (p. 110). Many of these chapters also continue Barclay's interrogation of how Scotland's Neolithic is framed (elegantly captured by Ralston in Chapter 1), and are concerned with breaking down unhelpfully rigid categories, refreshing outdated surveys or highlighting problematic or neglected issues. This gives the

volume a feeling of dynamism and purpose that, when combined with the space usually allowed in *festschriften* for more creative, provocative approaches, makes for an entertaining read.

The volume provides several very useful overviews of Neolithic archaeology in Scotland and beyond, combining up-to-date excavation and survey work with an outline history and an evaluation of various theoretical approaches. This includes the chapter by Cummings on the Clyde cairns of western Scotland (Chapter 3), Cooney's chapter on mortuary practices in Ireland (Chapter 5) and a survey by Brophy of domestic activity in lowland Scotland (Chapter 10). Any of these would easily slot into undergraduate required reading lists, and they provide important counterpoints to well-studied Neolithic corpora elsewhere in Britain and Ireland.

This is not to say that all of the archaeological evidence is of sufficiently high resolution to construct alternative narratives to those of Wessex and Orkney, for example. As several contributors note, the Neolithic record of large parts of mainland, lowland Scotland is still very patchy, and there is lots more work still to be done. Obstacles to interpretation include how Neolithic landscapes are captured (or not) by planning and heritage-management structures, interestingly detailed by MacGregor (Chapter 2), as well as the lack of modern, scientific excavation of certain monument classes such as the Clyde cairns mentioned above and the large timber settings discussed by Millican (Chapter 8). Across categories such as pit clusters and settlement remains, and in common with many other parts of Britain and Ireland, researchers have yet to process in full the bounty from recent developer-funded excavation (e.g. Noble *et al.* in Chapter 9).

In places, the patchiness of this archaeological record leads to arguments that are a little under-baked

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or too abstract. Cummings, for example, never completely follows through on how or why cairn building traditions might be shared across western Scotland and Ireland. Similarly, Gibson (admittedly offering “musings”, p. 57, on mortuary practices; Chapter 4) leaves hanging the intriguing assertion that Bronze Age food vessels developed directly from Middle Neolithic Impressed Ware; observations on the diversity in the discard of human remains are pertinent, but their impact is lessened by the use of examples drawn from different parts of Britain (and the Continent) and from different time periods. Another contribution, by Younger (Chapter 7), examines henge monuments with a promising opening position on the importance of human agency in memorialisation, but it does not get to grips with the ‘why’ of commemoration and the social reasoning behind the shift in the use and form of the three sites explored.

In other chapters, gaps in the archaeological record of mainland Scotland are approached head on, such as Loveday’s painstaking analysis of the components of upland cursus monuments and why so few have been recorded to date in Scotland (Chapter 6). Amusingly, the chapter concludes with a postscript announcing the discovery of an upland cursus monument exactly where predicted: across the Biggar Gap. Likewise, Millican’s cropmark survey of potential Neolithic timber monuments (Chapter 8) is a worthwhile first step in the exploration of a very challenging area, and will hopefully lead in due course to a programme of ground-truthing. In a similar vein, and closing the volume, are contributions by MacSween on the pottery from Balfarg (Chapter 11) and Wilkin on Beaker pottery from Neolithic and later monuments (Chapter 12), which both usefully highlight the ongoing value of synthesis and the revisiting of archaeological assemblages.

The identity of the people of Neolithic mainland Scotland may ultimately prove elusive (and here it is worth heeding Cummings’s assertion about the potential role of the sea in linking communities; ‘mainland’ may not have been a culturally meaningfully category). Nonetheless, the editors have succeeded in providing a sound platform for consideration of the archaeological evidence. Many valuable approaches are presented, as well as tangible strategies for future work to uncover and give voice to a hitherto under-explored region.

In comparison, the subject matter of *The development of Neolithic house societies in Orkney*, edited by Colin

Richards and Richard Jones, needs little introduction. Presented in glorious detail in a sizeable hardback volume, this work represents more proof—if any were needed—of why Orkney remains what Gordon Barclay somewhat derisively dubbed a ‘luminous centre’ of the British Neolithic. The ‘Cuween-Wideford Landscape Project’ was established in the early 1990s to explore the settlement pattern of the semi-enclosed world of the Bay of Firth on the east coast of Mainland, the largest of the Orkney Islands. During the Neolithic, the Bay of Firth was seemingly quite different, physically and culturally, to the open-bowl terrain of western Mainland with its massive displays of monumentality. The volume pulls together 20 years of fieldwork with accompanying post-excavation analysis and evolving interpretation. Ten of the 16 multi-authored chapters function as mini site reports on the Bay of Firth houses and the occasional burial monument, generously interspersed with colour archive photographs, site plans and maps. The final six chapters effectively form the excavation appendices, covering areas such as radiocarbon dating and Bayesian modelling, and a range of artefactual and ecofactual analyses.

This is, however, more than a traditional project monograph. As the title suggests, the volume examines the usefulness of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s concept of *sociétés à maisons* (house societies) for the explanation of changes in domestic and ceremonial architecture in Orkney between the fourth and second millennia BC. Briefly, *sociétés à maisons* are social groups that appear not to conform to established anthropological kinship structures, but instead draw upon the concept of the house to construct and legitimise identities under shifting social conditions. Richards and colleagues posit that the introduction of agriculture to Orkney realigned kinship relations, destabilising social conditions to the degree that *sociétés à maisons* emerged, developed and ultimately fragmented. The chapters thus comprise a balance of technical detail on the excavated architecture and theoretically informed discussion of how this detail fits into a wider social narrative.

The archaeological evidence as it unfolds is undeniably stunning, and the authors are to be commended for including much recent material, in some cases from fieldwork that is ongoing. Everyday intricacies, such as the enormous caches of charred grain at Stonehall (Chapter 5), wall plaster at Crossiecrown (Chapter 7) and multiple examples of

complex drainage systems, set my head spinning with their significance for previously puzzling elements at similar houses from elsewhere in Britain and Ireland. While stone domestic architecture might be unique to the Northern Isles, the results of the Stonehall investigations in particular highlight the wider relevance of open plan survey and excavation; investigating the spaces in between buildings is vital for proper understanding of settlement patterning and social structure.

With regard to interpretation, the *sociétés à maisons* concept seems genuinely useful. It underpins a compelling narrative that sees early Neolithic stalled cairn architecture deliberately referenced in the domestic sphere in the late fourth millennium BC, after stone begins to be used as a house-building material. Contrary to much current thinking, these were people choosing to build and live in 'houses of the dead', semi-isolated at first but gradually aggregating around expanding midden mounds. House-centred visual expression, continuity of practice and physical location communicate identity and social status amid growing inter- and intra-group competition, culminating in the emergence of 'big houses' within settlements and the adoption of novel architecture from the western seaboard. All of this brings vividly to life distinctly Orcadian communities, while at the same time informing broader, long-standing debates about house/tomb and wood/stone dichotomies.

Where the narrative is less convincing is in connecting back to the mid-fourth millennium BC timber-house horizons (pre- *sociétés à maisons*). Certainly, charting social complexity in prehistory is not easy, and the lighter footprint of these earlier horizons is difficult to trace, easily disturbed and, in the early stages of the project, frequently missed entirely (e.g. Chapter 2). Nevertheless, the "very particular historical conditions" (p. 7) under which *sociétés à maisons* emerged on Orkney feel as though they have not been addressed so much as pushed backwards to an ill-defined point after the arrival of farming, a chronological fudge that becomes more apparent with Bayesian modelling (Chapter 10). Given that our understanding of Orcadian timber houses is bound to change in the short term, now that archaeologists know what to look for, it seems premature to exclude them from the *sociétés à maisons* narrative. A focus on stone, while an integral part of Orcadian identity, masks potentially illuminating processes from other parts of Neolithic Britain and Ireland, where timber and stone were used side by side. Interestingly, dates for the extensive cereal deposits at Varne Dale (Chapter 9) fall squarely within the Irish timber-house horizon, and future results from this tantalising period in Orkney's prehistory are eagerly awaited. In sum, however, *The development of Neolithic house societies in Orkney* is a superb publication and an essential reference volume for all those interested in prehistoric daily life.