



## Book Reviews

### **BUILDING THE GREAT STONE CIRCLES OF THE NORTH EDITED BY C RICHARDS**

*Windgather Press, 2013. 322 pp, 241 illus incl 133 col plates, 51 B/W plates, 16 tables. ISBN 978-1-905119-12-0, pb, £39.95*

In the opinion of this reviewer, the UK academic audit system is an abomination, and a perversion of the principles of academic research. Having said this, it occasionally provides a spur to publication, and amongst the outpourings of much Research Excellence Framework (REF) - targeted publications you may occasionally alight upon a gem. This book is one such gem that may not have seen the light of day without the REF. I will return to this point at the end of this review, but first let us look at the contents of the book.

Stone circles are enigmatic monuments, and have long fascinated antiquarians and archaeologists alike. The book begins by considering the problems arising from interpreting stone circles. From the outset Richards questions the value of focusing on the use of stone circles, instead he turns his attention to their construction, arguing that ‘the process of making becomes the focus and function of the stone circle’ (Richards 2013, 5). Echoing the recent discussions of architectural design by Tim Ingold (2011; 2013), Lesley McFadyen (2007; 2013), Jeremy Till (2008) and others, he goes on to consider the wider processes involved in construction, arguing against contemporary notions of an architectural design blueprint which is simply then carried forward in the final construction of a building. In this sense stone circles are such enigmatic monuments because their fundamental meanings may lie more in their construction and creation and less than their use or design.

The first chapter introduces the concept of ‘wrapping’, a process that ‘stresses the importance of interfaces, skins and membranes’ (Richards 2013, 17). Richards argues that we can think of the encirclement embodied in stone circles as an example of ‘wrapping’ or enclosure. In his account wrapping is a dynamic process; the ‘emphasis is on practice – the wrapping of something’ (Richards 2013, 17). There is much to recommend in this concept as it shifts us away from an obsession with predetermined design, the *minutiae* of typology and attendant discussions of archaeoastronomy. As Richards discusses in the opening chapter, ethnographic research indicates that the construction of monuments is not merely the implementation of preconceived designs, but processes which involve risk, injury and social debate. It may also be an extended process taking many numbers of years. Key to the success of the megalith building project were the negotiation of social relationships, creating webs of relatedness across regions as monoliths are quarried and shifted from one place to another.

The book essentially focuses on two key regions: the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland. Chapter two discusses a succession of stone circles in the west of Scotland, including those of Machrie Moor, Arran, Templewood, Kilmartin, Argyll and Cultoon, Islay. This chapter really sets the scene for what is to follow as with mastery and incisiveness Richards examines the practice of making at these sites. Cultoon, especially is discussed as a good example of a ‘monument of the moment’ (Richards 2013, 38), whose meaning lies in the practice of its construction. The Cultoon stone circle evidently collapsed soon after its erection, it seems likely therefore that the act of building this monument was more important than building a durable

construction. Likewise, the account of Templewood provides a nuanced discussion of the deployment of building materials in the monuments, and its significance. This chapter appears innocuous, but in fact it provides a powerful argument against the typological approaches that have dominated both stone circle studies, and Scottish archaeology.

The following chapters (chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6) deal with Orkney, and Richards re-assesses Ritchie's excavations of the Stones of Stenness in the light of his own excavations at the nearby late Neolithic settlement at Barnhouse (Richards 2005). For me, the more enlightening chapter was 4, in which the excavations of the Ring of Brodgar are discussed. Brodgar is shown to be both the product of multiple sources of stone –giving rise to interpretations of communal and inter-island effort- and to also be a façade, a monument built for effect rather than permanence. The themes of impermanence are continued in chapters 5 and 6 in which the remarkable Vestra Fiold megalithic quarry and the Vestra Fiold horned cairn is discussed. The Vestra Fiold cairn is revealed as a component of a class of late Neolithic monuments whose architecture was realized through building, rather than design.

The remaining chapters (chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10) deal with the Western Isles of Scotland, and particularly the complex of stone circles at Calanais. Chapter 7 discusses the curious peristaliths that surround the early Neolithic passage graves of the Western Isles, and the authors of this chapter argue again that these stones were meant to wrap or protectively enclose the passage graves, and may have been the inspiration for later stone circles. Chapter 8 continues the theme of wrapping by discussing the amazing monument of Great Bernera, Lewis, a monument situated either side of the sound of water that provides access to the Calanais complex: here too we gain a sense of the way in which this monument encircles or wraps the landscape. Chapter 9 discusses the construction of the Na Dromannan stone circle on Lewis, a site which provides an excellent example of the kind of practices of making that are discussed throughout the book, as it appears the site collapsed soon after construction. One of the striking points to emerge from these final chapters which discuss the Lewis monuments is how they relate to parallel developments in Orkney (discussed in Chapters 3-6 of the book). Analysis of the available dates suggest close contemporary connections between late Neolithic communities in the two regions. Given this amazing finding, it must surely be a future research priority to also date the earlier Neolithic sequences in both regions. It has long been known that Unstan Ware pottery appears in both regions, it is therefore possible that links between the two island groups may have a much greater time depth. Sadly, these regions fell outside the remit of the 'Gathering Time' project (Whittle et. al. 2011), and although the Scottish research framework (ScARF 2007) does call for a clearer understanding of Neolithic chronologies in the Western Isles/Hebrides, the specific connections between the early Neolithic of the Western Isles and Orkney do not feature. I believe that an understanding of the regional histories (and relationships between) Orkney and the Western Isles is one of the key findings of this book. These discoveries must surely act as a call for action for better chronologies for these highly significant regions of the British Neolithic.

The idea of wrapping, and the principles of containment, unification and representation, associated with stone circle creation and construction is one of the key concepts that run throughout the book. The first chapter offers an account of Stonehenge 'unwrapped'. I am particularly in favour of this interpretation as it offers a far more dynamic picture of this iconic monument than the remarkably static interpretation of fixed meanings for certain materials (ie. wood and stone) used in the construction of Stonehenge offered by the Stonehenge Riverside project. The account of wrapping and construction shifts debates away from traditional post-processual accounts of monuments as representations (something that Richards has previously been guilty of; Richards 1993) towards non-representational accounts stressing contingency, and the on-going performative nature of practice. This can only be a good thing. I particularly approve of the discussion of the collapsed architecture of Na Domannan stone circle, Lewis

(Chapter 9) emphasizing the need to examine more accounts of contingency and failure in archaeology. Although I cannot help admiring the notion of wrapping, I remain sceptical as to its all-encompassing application throughout the book. In the account of Stonehenge as ‘wrapped’ we are left deciding between a Madagascan-derived ethnographic analogy (with the deployment of distinct materials which represent life stages) and a Polynesian-derived ethnographic analogy (that is, the notion of wrapping). Wrapping, as a concept, seems to be all pervasive, and while practice and contingency are discussed in the building of stone circles we remain locked in the vice of cosmology and mythopraxis (as discussed in Chapter 10). How do we reconcile the avowed distrust of preconceived design while also discussing stone circles as manifestations of myths or cosmologies? In Chapter 10 we find Richards quoting Marshall Sahlins on mythopraxis, ‘a process whereby particular social practices were understood as the re-enactment of myth’ (p 254). Are we to understand mythopraxis and cosmology as the simple re-enactment of preconceived design? How should we think about these processes alongside the discussion in the opening chapter, and in Chapter 9 (on monumental failure at Na Dromannan), which promote open-endedness, contingency and social debate? I am not convinced that Richards reconciles these two competing aspects of his account. However, my discomfort with wrapping as an overarching cosmological explanation is probably my only grumble.

Whilst the catch-all notion of ‘wrapping’ clearly needs further scrutiny I now want to finish with a series of reasons why you should certainly read this book:

1. It is beautifully illustrated, with plenty of excellent eye-catching photographs of stone circles, ethnographic images, and coloured plans and section drawings. I welcome the move towards better illustrated, and more attractive and engaging, site reports to replace the traditional dull authoritative monograph. This book has been put together with some care. I particularly like the fact that the plans and section drawings use colour. This has to be a positive move that aids clarity of communication. I hope this is more widely adopted in the future.
2. Its really well written, with an engaging and lively narrative.
3. It deftly weaves together theoretical arguments with field-based accounts and excavation reportage. We tend to produce *either* overarching theoretical statements *or* excavation accounts; strangely archaeologists rarely weave together evidence from the field or excavation directly with their theoretical statements. The result too often being that theory tends to be dislocated from practice. But this book demonstrates precisely why archaeological theory is a necessary component of the discipline, and how it should inform and work alongside our field- based observations and excavation accounts.
4. The book provides a rich account of the remarkable set of stone circles in Scotland and firmly illustrates their importance and significance for the wider understanding of the British Neolithic. For those who believe that the most significant stone circles are to be found in a small corner of the Wiltshire countryside, this book disabuses them of that erroneous view.
5. The book examines not only stone circles, but also Orcadian settlements and chambered tombs and Hebridean passage graves. It firmly sets these series of important sites and regions in a wider contextual and interpretative framework. Importantly it places Scottish prehistory firmly on the map, and its accounts of construction and society mean that it will be of interest to prehistorians from around the globe. In that sense the book has to be seen as one of the most significant recent books on Scottish prehistory, and probably the best book yet written on stone circles (sorry Aubrey).

I began this review by lambasting the British academic audit system (the dreaded REF), and observed that this book like many others published in the last few years had probably been written to fulfill a research quota. However when you look closely at this book it in fact seems

more like an *anti-REF* publication. It is evidently the result of over a decade of research (ie. it's writing and research will have crossed several successions of audit cycles). The book is a testament to what can be achieved on a long-term research project (I counted 3, probably 4, excavation projects and numerous field survey seasons). For the good of the discipline of archaeology, and the good of academia in general we need to see more long term and well-considered research projects, such as this one. For that reason, along with those listed above, this book is highly recommended.

## References

Ingold, T, 2011. *Being Alive: essays on movement, knowledge and description*. Routledge: London

Ingold, T, 2013. *Making: anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*. Routledge: London

McFadyen, L, 2007. Neolithic architecture and participation: practices of making at long barrow sites in southern Britain, in J. Last (ed.) *Beyond the grave: new perspectives on barrows*. Oxbow: Oxford, 22-29

McFadyen, L, 2013. Designing with living: a contextual archaeology of Dependant architecture, in B. Alberti, A.M. Jones and J. Pollard (eds.) *Archaeology after Interpretation: returning materials to archaeological theory*. Left Coast Press: walnut creek, CA, 135-150

Richards, C, 1993. Monumental choreography: architecture and spatial representation in later Neolithic Orkney, in C. Tilley (ed.) *Interpretative Archaeology*. Berg: Oxford, 313-336

Richards, C. 2005. *Dwelling among the Monuments*. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research Monograph Series.

Richards, C. 2013. *Building the Great Stone Circles of the North*. Oxbow: Oxford

ScARF 2007 Scottish Archaeological Research Framework: Neolithic, <http://www.scottishheritagehub.com/content/scarf-neolithic-panel-report>, visited 28<sup>th</sup> May 2014

Till, J, 2008. *Architecture depends*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.

Whittle, A, Healy, F, and Bayliss, A, 2011. *Gathering Time: Dating the early Neolithic enclosures of southern Britain and Ireland*. Oxbow: Oxford

*Dr Andrew Meirion Jones*  
*University of Southampton*

Review received: June 2014

*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor*



Another theory is that the great stone circle was used to store terrestrial energy which was then generated across the country through the so-called ley lines, which are invisible channels for a special kind of power. Besides the theories of scientists, there are local legends. One of them tells that Stonehenge was built by the devil in a single night. The stone which the devil threw is known as the heel stone, and people will show it to you lying by the side of the road.

Discussion. Which is the best known prehistoric monument in Britain? What does the legend say about the building of Stonehenge? Bekreniova 2020-02-17T21:08:44+00:00 Categories: Maxim, The United Kingdom|Tags: the UK, the United Kingdom|2 Comments. Share This Story, Choose Your Platform! Building these megalithic structures required common effort and the festivities there was also communal, with feasts. It all made sense to them. People were now able to see themselves as part of a greater, cosmological universe and more: now they were able to foretell celestial events, perhaps they could influence them. Related Questions. More Answers Below. That's why stone circles started sprouting during the Neolithic Age. They figured out true north because the Pole star thousands of years ago was between Vega & Thuban. The 2 were spinning around each other. The Pole star today is Polaris. 220 views · View 2 Upvoters. Answer requested by. Slavyanka Slavyanka. Sponsored by Gundry MD. Cardiologist reveals the only protein you need to lose weight. Of all prehistoric monuments, few are more emotive than the great stone circles that were built throughout Britain and Ireland. From the tall, elegant, pointed monoliths of the Stones of Stenness to the grandeur of Stonehenge and the sarsen blocks at Avebury, circles of stone exert a magnetic fascination to those who venture into their sphere. In Britain today, more people Of all prehistoric monuments, few are more emotive than the great stone circles that were built throughout Britain and Ireland. From the tall, elegant, pointed monoliths of the Stones of Stenness to the grandeur of Stoneheng A stone circle is a circular alignment of standing stones. They are commonly found across Northern Europe and Great Britain, and typically date from the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age eras, with most concentrations appearing from 3000 BCE. The best known examples include those at the henge monument at Avebury, the Rollright Stones, and elements within the ring of standing stones at Stonehenge. Ancient stone circles appear throughout Europe, with many existing in the Pyrenees, on the Causse de A stone circle thought to be thousands of years old has turned out to be a lot more modern after a former farm owner admitted building it in the 1990s. The recumbent stone circle in the parish of Leochel-Cushnie, Aberdeenshire, was reported by the site's current farm and was considered unusual for its small diameter and relatively small stones. I hope the stones continue to be used and enjoyed. While not ancient, it is still in a fantastic location and makes for a great feature in the landscape. Recumbent stone circles often date back 3,500-4,500 years and are unique to the north-east of Scotland. Ackerman said: "These types of monument are notoriously difficult to date. For this reason we include any modern replicas of ancient monuments in our records in case they are later misidentified."