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Review article

Ever decreasing circles

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P.J. ASHMORE, *Calanais: survey and excavation 1979-88*. 2016. 1241 pages, 939 colour and b&w illustrations, numerous tables, and 12 appendices. Edinburgh: Historic Environment Scotland. Available for free download at <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications/publication/?publicationId=b6aee5fd-5980-4872-a2e0-a63c00cc7b68>.

RICHARD BRADLEY & COURTNEY NIMURA (eds), *The use and reuse of stone circles: fieldwork at five Scottish monuments and its implications*. 2016. xvi+168 pages, 148 colour and b&w illustrations, 9 tables. Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow. 978-1-78570-243-3 paperback £39.95.

Stone circles represent one of the most evocative and enigmatic classes of field monument in Britain. In his seminal study, John Barnatt (1989) listed more than 650 examples, but few have been excavated and even fewer securely dated. Aubrey Burl's lifelong interest in the topic led him to suggest, mainly on typological grounds, three main phases to their development between c. 3400 and 1200 BC (Burl 1983), a scheme that has been used rather patchily since. Happily, the two books reviewed here, together with a substantial report from the 'Great Stone Circles Project' published a few years earlier (Richards 2013), at last provide a raft of solid evidence through which to evaluate the tradition of building stone circles, albeit mainly with reference to the far north of Britain.

What emerges is a simplification of Burl's tri-partite division into just two stages. Starting a little before 3000 BC is what might be called the Age of the Great Stone Circles, characterised by rings that are massive in their design and construction, distributed from Wessex in the south to Orkney in the north, frequently associated with henges, and often found to be early components of the sacred places they occupy. From *c.* 2000 BC, comfortably within the Chalcolithic and extending through into the Bronze Age proper in conventional techno-chronology, circle-building traditions changed in favour of small rings in clustered distributions in a series of regional styles that are not necessarily contemporaneous. These rings are rarely the primary features of a site; more often they were additions to existing cairns as if enclosing them. It is a pattern of development paralleled in the design and construction of the timber circles set up by communities who either lacked access to suitable stone or whose concepts of materiality allowed the substitution of stone by wood (see Darvill 2010: fig. 69).

Ashmore's excavations at Calanais between 1979 and 1988 show that this well-known and much-visited site is part of the Great Stone Circle tradition. The report is a doorstep-sized volume of more than 1200 pages with nearly 1000 illustrations. Available only as a free downloadable pdf, much of the traditional apparatus of academic publishing, such as lists of figures and tables, has been dispensed with; there is no index as you can search for any word or phrase on screen (but not, of course, when using a print-out). Without the restrictive costs of printing, it was perhaps considered acceptable to include more material than would otherwise have been possible. In one sense that saves researchers a trip (actual or virtual) to the archive, but it has the effect of overwhelming the reader and making some of the material hard to digest. Navigating within the electronic document is also very time-consuming, but using a print-out would probably require a risk assessment before lifting it or moving it around your desk. A stronger editorial hand would no doubt have improved the volume immeasurably, shortening it, weeding out duplicate illustrations and correcting at least some of the numerous errors such as the mis-numbering of the first table in Section 2 and all of the illustrations in Section 27.

Conventional in some respects, unconventional in others, the 28 numbered sections and 12 appendices by Ashmore and nine other contributors leave little unsaid. Following a useful abstract, the introduction deals with the place name and the discovery of the site before turning to the theoretical perspectives used and Ashmore's approach to recording and interpretation in what he describes as a "cognitive-processual framework" (p. 8; elaborated in Appendix 1). Antiquarian descriptions from Martin Martin in 1703 to Pitt Rivers in 1885 are summarised in Section 3, followed by a review of twentieth-century research. Section 4 sets out the background to the 1979–1988 campaign, the pre-excavation state of the site, and further notes about the recording systems

and interpretative frameworks. A series of geophysical surveys across the whole site are described in Section 5, while Sections 6 to 14 provide a trench by trench, blow by blow, account of the excavations. Much of what is included here, for example summary context descriptions, would normally be found in the site archive, and for those not used to dealing with the minutiae of the excavation process these sections will to prove demanding. Understanding what was found is often frustrating, not least because the reader has to move between sections for what, in some cases, are adjacent trenches. The site plan (illustration 4.1) is confusing as, at first, it appears that not all the trenches are labelled; in fact, the unlabelled ones turn out to be detached parts of the trenches that do have labels.

Sections 15 to 18 deal with the relatively modest assemblages of finds: cremated bone, coarse stone tools, lithics and pottery, each by a respected expert in their field. Soils, vegetation survey, palaeoenvironment and macroplant identifications are dealt with equally competently by relevant experts in Sections 19 to 22. Section 23 considers the 39 radiocarbon determinations, variously combining them through a critical contextual analysis to create 18 phases of archaeologically attested activities from forager visits in the fifth millennium BC through to peat clearance in the first millennium AD. There is no Bayesian modelling of the kind successfully applied to other sequences of this scale and complexity, although illustration 24.4 usefully summarises the phases against cultural horizons.

After nearly a thousand pages Ashmore begins to draw the material together (Section 24). The scale varies from the site itself through to the wider world beyond, and supporting the positivist approach even the philosopher Karl Popper makes an appearance to help define the questions under investigation (p. 966). The site phasing is examined in considerable detail, but the poverty of the phase plans, which are of different scales and each covering only parts of the site, makes it less than easy to follow the narrative. Alternative interpretations are presented in equal detail but rarely resolved: an early ditch in Area D may be a linear scoop, part of a circular enclosure, or part of a rectangular enclosure (pp. 987–992). What seems fairly clear is that the great central monolith and roughly concentric ring of 12 (remaining) stones were set up *c.* 3000 BC by people who used Grooved Ware (Phase 6). The three rows radiating east, south and west are not well dated, but may have been added *c.* 2400 BC (Phase 7c). A little later, after 2350 BC, a small chambered cairn was built within the eastern sector of the circle, squeezed between the central monolith and the outer ring, with its entrance to the east (Phase 8). It was associated with human burials and early style Beaker pottery. Various pennanular enclosures lay immediately outside the stone circle, the earliest probably contemporaneous with the chambered cairn. The avenue leading away to the north is tentatively dated to the late second millennium BC (Phase 10). Very little appears to have happened

at the site after *c.* 2000 BC except for cultivation and the growth of peat across the site. Calanais therefore seemingly fell out of use at much the same time that work began on a series of new stone circles, quite different in character, in eastern Scotland—the subject of the second volume under review here.

The use and reuse of stone circles, edited by Richard Bradley & Courtney Nimura, reports on surveys and excavations undertaken between 2011 and 2013 at five stone circles in Aberdeenshire (Hillhead, Tarland; Waulkmill, Tarland; Hill of Tuach, Kintore), Inverness-shire (Laikenbuie, Auldearn) and Perth and Kinross (Croftmoraig). The investigations follow on from earlier research at henges and other related sites in eastern Scotland that “raised a series of problems that demanded further investigation” (p. vii). In stark contrast to *Calanais*, the reporting is succinct (under 200 pages and fewer than 150 illustrations all in), tightly edited, well supported by an array of apparatus and accessible through an extensive index. Five contributors are named on the contents page, but more than a handful of others provide specialist reports and should really have been listed here too. Overall, the text is easy to follow yet challenging at every turn. Undertaken within a post-processual framework, it uses the empirical evidence of fieldwork to develop fresh understandings of materiality and the ways in which stone circles were part of a world in which human and natural elements formed a continuum rather than distinct categories.

An extended summary of the project and its findings is set out as a preface, followed in Part 1 by a chapter on the development of the project and five self-contained chapters describing the results of the fieldwork at each of the sites. Clear plans, sections and photographs show what was found, with discussions of the finds, soil samples and dates by relevant experts alongside the site narratives. This works well and, step by step, builds a picture of monument complexity and longevity.

Most of the sites had not previously been excavated, but Croftmoraig overlooking the River Tay is well known in the literature having been thoroughly investigated by Stuart Piggott and Derek Simpson in 1967. Following their detailed publication in 1971 (Piggott and Simpson 1971), the site has since been re-interpreted several times and is often cited as one of the earliest stone circles in Britain. The 2012 excavation reported here shows how important it is to field-check revised interpretations based on published work; rather than being early, the site is now demonstrably late in the overall sequence, starting *c.* 2000 BC and remaining a focus of activity for nearly 1000 years. Such use and reuse is well represented at the other sites too, with an emphasis on the deposition of cremated bone during the middle and late Bronze Age, occupation during the earlier Iron Age, use as cemeteries in the Roman Iron Age, and slight evidence of renewed interest during the Pictish period. These are themes picked up in Part 2 where four chapters successively look at stone-circle building and use in the early second millennium BC, the patterns of subsequent re-use, variations in

the construction and meaning of these sites and, finally, a detailed study of how Croftmoraig illustrates the changing ways that stone circles have been studied and interpreted over the last 60 years.

Scholars who like clear-cut monument typologies and simple developmental sequences will find *Use and reuse* uncomfortable reading. The message writ loud and clear is that these sites cannot be classified very easily as they are constantly changing their form, purpose and meaning in ways that even coherent phase plans cannot really capture. Each monument is unique even though it may incorporate common themes; Croftmoraig, Bradley explains, “draws together the land and the sky, and its unusual synthesis of geological and structural elements accounts for its distinctive architecture” (p. 151). Exploring the continuous dimensions of nature and culture, landscape and skyscape, form and meaning emerge as themes that deserve further investigation and could provide a research agenda for the next phase of stone circle studies.

The two reports considered here are quite different in their approach, especially their opposed theoretical perspectives and different styles of presentation. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, and each will no doubt be preferred by different audiences. Both make signal contributions to the study of stone circles, and will no doubt be widely consulted and influential. They effectively challenge researchers in other parts of Britain to investigate and compare the construction, use and reuse of stone circles elsewhere with what we now see in Scotland.

On a wider compass, these volumes also neatly illustrate some of the difficult choices that nowadays have to be made about the way archaeological work is published. *Calanais* is a downloadable pdf, placed on-line by the government agency responsible for archaeological work in Scotland, but inaccessible to anyone without a computer linked to the internet. It has no ISBN number to define its identity in the world of books and no Digital Object Identifier (DOI) to give it a permanent presence on the internet. There is a real danger that, after a few organisational restructurings and some ruthless housekeeping of the host website, it will vanish from sight. *Use and reuse*, by contrast, is a conventional book by one of Britain’s most respected and prolific archaeological publishers available for a relatively modest price. A digital version is listed with its own ISBN and cataloguing details on the title page verso, although a quick search of the internet failed to find a copy available for purchase or download. The contrast is obvious, and the situation far from satisfactory or unique: but how should we proceed? In what seems to be a time of experimentation and transition in the way fieldwork reports are published and transmitted to their varied readerships there is surely much to commend a dual approach: printed or on-demand hard copy as well as digital download. In this way all audiences can be catered for and the medium- to long-term availability of the material assured. In a world increasingly aspiring to Open Access,

printed copies may have a price tag attached while digital downloads could perhaps be free to users. But however reports are delivered, content and high production values remain critically important. I well remember the managing director of a leading publishing house telling me with a wry smile on his face that “books should be uplifting... not downloading”. He may be right, but still better are uplifting books that can also be downloaded!

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