



## Book Reviews

### IMAGE AND AUDIENCE; RETHINKING PREHISTORIC ART, BY RICHARD BRADLEY

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009. 260pp, 84 b&w figs. hb ISBN 978-0-19-9533385-2 (£50)

This is a book with a mission. Its goal is to bring the study of prehistoric art in from the cold by integrating it into the methods of contemporary archaeology. The key is an archaeological approach in which examples of prehistoric art are studied in relation to the places and circumstances in which they were used in ancient times. What makes the book distinctive is its emphasis on the audience interacting with the artwork and its assemblage of detailed case studies drawn from a wide variety of locations in Europe. Embryonic versions of the approaches adopted here are familiar from earlier Bradley publications, notably his acclaimed *Rock Art and the Prehistory of Atlantic Europe* (Routledge, 1997), but here they are applied in their full maturity to a wider range of material.

The discussion hinges around two major traditions of prehistoric art in Europe, namely megalithic art in its broadest sense and the diverse visual culture of the Scandinavian Bronze Age. Three chapters are devoted to each. Alongside the concluding chapter, they will be essential reading for anyone interested in these topics or looking for an inspiring approach to the study of ancient art. As a prelude to these topics, the book opens with two chapters that set the scene for what follows. These will be discussed below. In classic Richard Bradley mode, the volume is brimful of ideas, well chosen analogies, innovative perspectives and unexpected contextual information. It leaves the reader with a list of potential places to visit for the first time and, possibly its greatest achievement, an equally pressing list of places to be re-visited in order experience at firsthand what the book has brought to life.

As my response to the book is overwhelmingly positive, it is as well to deal initially with my only serious criticism. I found the opening pages to be the least effective of the entire text and they appear to sit uneasily with the richness that follows. My difficulty is not that the author highlights his discomfort with the term *prehistoric art* but that his exploration of this difficulty is unsatisfactorily, appearing to act mainly as a device to move on to his core theme, the audience's response to ancient artwork. In looking for definitions of prehistoric art, the text cites antecedents like Powell, Sandars, Bahn and Renfrew, all of whom have contributed handsomely in the area, but since his difficulty is with the term *art* in a prehistoric context it might have been more enlightening to explore the nature and parameter of art itself rather than ways in which archaeologists have interpreted it. Otherwise his suspicions around the term *prehistoric art* border on spreading a fear of the unknown and implies that notions of fine art developed over recent centuries represent a comprehensive understanding of art. This is not the case, as elucidated by a variety of twentieth century philosophers, but it reflects a common tendency, beginning with Vasari in the 16th century, to explore art theory exclusively from the perspective of a prevailing artistic tradition. Wittgenstein saves us unnecessary introspection on these matters by suggesting that art, like games, is not understood by means of definitions or sets of criteria but by experience. By coincidence, the approach adopted by Richard Bradley is essentially based on that premise and is close to one of Hegel's key determinants of art: It is created essentially for people, it is to a greater or less degree delivered from a sensuous medium, and addressed to the senses.

Notwithstanding the uncertainty at the beginning, the text is quickly into its stride. Chapter 1 highlights the effect of prior beliefs on our response to ancient material, discusses the purpose and distorting effects of museum display, and then explores case studies from the Iron Age, notably the Battersea shield and Gundestrup cauldron, to demonstrate that an excessive focus on the artwork itself, or the moment of its production or deposition, can divert attention from the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the artefact's life story. In chapter 2, we are introduced to the thinking of Alfred Gell who argued that a specifically anthropological approach to indigenous art should be concerned less with its meanings and aesthetics and more with making sense of associated human behaviour. How people interacted with rock art panels, for example, should take precedence over discussions of abstraction or representation.

Chapter 3 brings the reader underground, so to speak, to discuss the role of megalithic tombs as art galleries and metaphors for prevailing cosmologies. It provides a succession of fascinating insights but raises another gratuitous issue, in this case anthropomorphism, without adding any serious analysis. In essence, the author follows an easy path by accepting without serious questioning that anthropomorphism is a core element of megalithic art in Iberia and France, even when the interpretations are based on the most extremely schematic images, but is completely absent in Ireland. Is it? It seems to me that we have moved on sufficiently from the excessively optimistic interpretations of the mid-twentieth century to be able to examine seriously the small sample of possible anthropomorphic images in Irish megalithic art. Again, however, Bradley's seemingly casual comments on this topic are but a momentary aberration. If the book brings the study of prehistoric art in from the cold, then Chapter 4 does likewise for statues, steles and portable figures. It is a tour-de-force ranging from south-east to north-west Europe, and one of its great strengths is the author's identification of common themes in the treatment of these objects. Chapter 5 is another triumph of synthesis, linking megalithic art with a variety of other art forms in prehistoric Europe, notably open-air art

or *rock art*. Correctly, in my view, the chapter focuses on the Iberian Peninsula as a melting pot of traditions and his elucidation of the comparisons and contrasts between various forms and contexts, notably megalithic art, schematic art and Galician rock art, is a profoundly timely overview.

Chapter 6 switches the focus to Scandinavia, highlighting the common imagery linking metalwork, rock art and settings of stones, especially in the form of ships. Chapter 7 elaborates on Kaul's *Ships on Bronzes* to argue that the representation of movement is a key theme in Scandinavian Bronze Age art, related inextricably to an environmental cosmology in which the sun, people, the shoreline and even time are constantly in flux. As the discussion of rock art gains momentum in chapter 8, changing environmental factors are explored across various time-spans from the daily cycle of the sun to the gradual lowering of sea levels during the Bronze Age. The interaction of representation, audience and performance is explored, as are the roles of fire, sunlight, snow and running water. The author's remarks linking these issues with detailed observations at specific Scandinavian rock art complexes, including the experiential movement of those viewing the panels, make this a thoroughly enlightening chapter.

The final chapter is essentially a review of what has gone before, viewed through the prism of themes introduced at the beginning of the book, specifically the changing perceptions of ancient artworks that resulted from their appropriation by modernist artists. By contrast with the transformations undergone by portable artefacts between manufacture and deposition, he contends, rock art generally incorporates its full life story in one place. The chapter (and the book) ends with a fascinating parallel between certain archaeological complexes, notably the Sutton Hoo ship burial, and modern installation art. Both are a medium for the exploration and communication of ideas through a process in which the design and life story of the ship, for example, are subsumed into a complex final act of deposition in which the ship is but one element.

Richard Bradley's talent for synthesis by means of linked case studies finds an ideal outlet in this book which, incidentally, is judiciously and neatly illustrated. The result is a volume that will be indispensable reading for anyone with an interest in the study of art as an anthropological phenomenon or in the specific topics around which the discussion ranges. It is provocative and wide-ranging but remarkably coherent fusion of information from many sources in which the role and performance of the audience at rock art sites is a recurring motif. How tragically ironic, therefore, that its publication should coincide with the death of Blaze O'Connor whose pioneering approach to rock art settings, although not explicitly referenced in the volume, has opened up newer ways again of examining the interaction of prehistoric people with these locations.

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