



Book Reviews

THE MEGALITHS OF NORTHERN EUROPE, BY MAGDALENA S. MIDGLEY

London: Routledge, 2008. 225pp + xiv, 80 b&w illus., hb ISBN 10:0-415-35280-4 (£60)

Magdalena Midgley has previously published wide-ranging syntheses on aspects of the continental northern European Neolithic, including a massive volume on the TRB (*Trichterrandbecher* culture) and books on the origin of earthen long barrows. In theme and temporal progression, this book is a natural follow-on. *The Megaliths of Northern Europe* offers a detailed account of the 4th and 3rd millennia BC megalithic tombs of the TRB; the coverage being on the Netherlands, northern Germany and southern Scandinavia, with a real focus on Danish and Swedish sites. Midgley possesses a keen eye for detail, and the book presents a considerable body of closely researched information, integrating older and antiquarian observations with data from more recent excavations such as that derived from recent programmes of restoration of Danish tombs.

Although an account of TRB dolmens and passage graves, the primary subject matter is bracketed by an introductory chapter on the TRB and pre-megalithic long barrows, and a wider concluding review that takes in megalithic tombs across NW Europe. The core of the book is represented by chapters on terminology, approaches to study and distribution (including the landscape location of tombs and their links to contemporary agricultural practices), construction, mortuary function, and architecture. There is more here than the book's title implies; not least in the final whirlwind tour between related sites in western France (notably Bougon and old Breton favourites) and the UK.

There is a much here to excite those interested in megaliths and the European Neolithic generally. Midgley's account gives a good impression of the striking skill and ingenuity in tomb construction – in some instances one can believe in specialist builders – including the remarkable efforts made to keep the chambers of passage graves dry through the construction of drainage channels and stone and clay cappings. As elsewhere, the effort expended on housing the ancestors stands in stark contrast to that invested in houses for the living. The materiality of construction is touched upon through consideration of raw material choice and colour symbolism; Midgley noting the 'tension between constructional and symbolic requirements of these structures' (p107). This is a theme that has much potential to be expanded further.

Chapter 4, on associated funerary deposits, highlights the very patchy survival of deposits of human bone, due to later activity and acidic geology in many areas. The best evidence comes from the passage graves of Mecklenburg and southern Scandinavia, where numbers of individuals per tomb are not infrequently in excess of 50. Good and useful consideration of burial format, mortuary treatment, taphonomy, and variation between dolmen and passage grave deposits is offered. Naturally, debate surrounds process, and various arguments for the introduction of already disarticulated bones versus *in situ* transformation of intact corpses, arrangement (including seating of the corpse), sorting of deposits, bone removal, and so forth. While forensic studies of such deposits are under way, such as Ahlström's analysis of the meticulously excavated deposits in the passage grave at Frälsegården, Västergötland, duly noted, there is a sense that much still remains to be understood. The kind of detailed reanalysis of human bone deposits undertaken recently on British long barrow and chambered tomb deposits could yield much information on taphonomic processes, demography and lifeways, especially if combined with aDNA and isotopic analyses to enhance information on kinship, diet and lifetime movement. This is an area where revolutionary changes in knowledge are certain to come, and one suspects this chapter might be radically different if re-written in a decade's time.

Overall, this is a great book, but in places the approach taken seems quite pedestrian and functionalist, at least to those more used to reading the recent theory-led literature on British megalithic tombs. Thus, the chapter on construction begins with consideration of labour estimates for building megaliths that are thoroughly reductive (the 'builder's estimate' approach), and then dissects the anatomy of tombs into their constituent body parts – packing materials, orthostats, dry-stone walling and so forth – to facilitate analysis. There is little sense of the event and risk of construction, and how it was embedded within social strategies, the power of tradition and relations with place. Such reflects the author's data first stance and her firm belief in the value of 'traditional fieldwork and excavation' (p xiv). Tilley-esque phenomenology is left to one side, though his work on Swedish megaliths is extensively referenced (and his aversion to rain commented upon). This is no bad thing, since basic data and observation can often be powerful in their own right. Note, for example, estimates of the original numbers of megalithic tombs in the TRB zone, which give a staggering MNI of c. 40,000 (p31); and observations on the former extent of wetlands within these regions which highlight that the relationship between megaliths and water (whether meaningful or not) was often unavoidable (p36).

However, it would be wrong to paint a picture of the work as in any sense atheoretical or empiricist. Interpretation is worked in throughout, especially in later chapters where the influence of Hertz, Helms and other anthropological theorists is quite evident. The last two chapters offer a range of interesting interpretations of specific bodies of evidence. Deliberate fragmentation of ceramics and lithics (the latter through burning) in forecourt deposits is seen as a process necessary to make them acceptable offerings and facilitate their transformation into ancestral worlds, while also serving to rupture time and mark off 'ancestral time from all other times' (p154). Concepts of duality are explored in relation to the constructional use of 'twin stones' (split blocks) and the remarkable twin passage graves found in Denmark, several of which feature conjoined chambers built around a common orthostat. Midgley argues that these constructional dualities might condense many common cosmological dualities and draws connections with Kristiansen's claim for the later, Bronze Age, emergence of 'divine twins' as principal divinities. The book ends with thoughts on the protective role often afforded by ancestors, via their link with long-distance travel, myths of origin, and so forth. Midgley utilises this line of association to highlight the possible apotropaic qualities of megalithic tombs, suggesting that, as houses for the ancestors, 'under certain conditions ... megaliths may also have been protective and instructive devices placed along frequently traversed routes', and in Helmsian fashion served as components in 'a network of places at which encounters with strangers *en route* could be conducted in safety' (p200).

Midgley has done great service in amassing and drawing together the record of northern European megalithic tombs, and presenting it in a readable and accessible format. While the back-cover text gives the impression that the book is aimed at undergraduate and postgraduate students (the only way to entice publishers like Routledge), it is clearly intended for a peer-group audience too, and deserves wide readership..The study of British rock art is flourishing as never before, and these two books are both outstanding contributions to the field, although markedly different in content and approach.

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