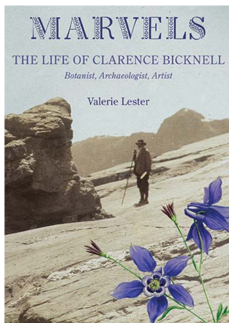
Review article

Alpine rock art: then and now, and into the future?

Christopher Chippindale*

Valerie Lester. 2018. *Marvels: the life of Clarence Bicknell—botanist, archaeologist, artist*. Kibworth Beauchamp: Matador; 978-1-7890-1494-5 £25.

Alberto Marretta. 2018. *La roccia 12 di Seradina 1: documentazione, analisi e interpretazione di un capolavoro dell'arte rupestre alpina*. Capo di Ponte: Edizioni del Parco di Seradina-Bedolina; 978-88-941252-0-7.



Rock art in the Alps, centred on just two expansive sites, complements the many Scandinavian sites as a major source for open-air art in later European prehistory. A revelatory biography of one of the pioneering researchers there, published simultaneously with a superb monograph on a single rich surface of Alpine art, prompts this review of how we have studied, how we presently study and how we may come to study that art.

Although Anglophone archaeologists are so interested in theory and method, it is striking how few full-length biographies of individual archaeologists exist. Valerie Lester's life of Clarence Bicknell shows how valuable they are—even though Bicknell is so obscure. Who was he? What did he do? Why does he matter today? Bicknell was born in 1843, to a father so rich that the son was monied for life. Enthused by High Church Anglicanism, he became pastor of the English church in Bordighera, the Mediterranean resort on the Italian side of the border with France. Its population was then more than half English, an expatriate community overshadowed by the incurable tuberculosis that its benign climate was hoped to soothe. Losing his faith, Bicknell turned to botany and good works. Going into the high Maritime Alps in search of its rarer plants, he visited Monte Bego (then in Italy, today in France) and was captivated by the prehistoric images carved into its bright and shining schist and sandstone surfaces. He first worked on the art in 1897, when he rented a mountain house for the summer, with the intention both of botanising and visiting more of the rock figures that so fascinated him. No sensible study had been made of them, so Bicknell plunged in, with a diligent programme of field recording, perceptive analysis and a synthesis so enduring that it was reprinted six decades later in new French and Italian translations.

Bicknell, therefore, is remembered on Bego and in Bordighera, where his *Museo Bicknell*—dismayingly or charmingly, or both—seems, on first entering, as if unchanged in the more than a century since his death in 1917. An astonishing amount survives of his vast output of paintings and drawings: the botanical watercolours and rubbings on soft paper of the Bego rock art in Genova (as Bicknell thought his little museum too frail to hold these safely); some in the Museo Bicknell; much still with his family, including many decorative designs. Its current family custodian, Marcus Bicknell, has encouraged this new interest, founding a Clarence Bicknell Association with a very good website (www.clarencebicknell.com), a stylish documentary film and a facsimile reprint of the handsomely illustrated visitors' book of Casa Fontanalba, the mountain cottage that Bicknell built and decorated below Bego. The website also hosts scores of good short research papers and notes. All of this is well explored in Lester's biography, finely and artfully written—artfully in the good sense, as it is not obvious in its flowing narrative that sources for the life are fragmentary, and so for many aspects are slight or absent—fully and well illustrated, richly designed and published at quite a low price. It is full of insights and anecdotes about his energy and his several idealisms.

* *McDonald Institute of Archaeology, University of Cambridge, UK (Email: chippindale2@gmail.com)*

© Antiquity Publications Ltd, 2019
antiquity 93 371 (2019): 1378–1380 https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.46

https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As a rounded life, the biography properly covers Bicknell's archaeology in a proportionate way, including his meeting Émile Cartailhac and the young Abbé Breuil in 1905, and, enthused, then going to the Les Eyzies caves and Niaux. Thirty years ago, in the only biographical study on Bicknell that then went beyond the Bego specifics (Chippindale 1984), I explored why his fieldwork was so good and his archaeological reasoning so effective. The conclusion still stands. At a time when a systematic archaeology from the field evidence was still held back by weak observations (there was still confusion as to what on Bego was prehistoric art, and what was natural rock formation) and by a habit of pointless speculation (which people made these images—were they the Phoenicians?), Bicknell had a decisive advantage. He was energetic, used to hard-walking fieldwork, observant and skilled both in knowing the value of good clear and detailed records, and in his botanical recording. Indeed, he invented a good way to record the Bego art with black wax rubbings on soft paper, and experimented with photography. Then he made the key analytical insight that the *cornu*, the elaborated U-shape that is the most common distinct motif, is a stylised image of an ox-head. In many short papers, Graham Avery has fully reported Bicknell's botanising world, on the strong network of collaboration, collegiality and friendships among the plant-hunters, and specifically that the alpinist Fritz Mader so encouraged Bicknell to study Bego's rocks as well as flowers (e.g. Avery 2016).

What is also striking is that botanical work by the 1880s had a strong proven theory, a matching methodology and an ambition that required close collaboration. Defining and identifying the Linnaean species was the theory. The method was in field exploration and recording to define variability within the species and its distribution. Close collaboration was essential because no one could cover everything alone. The archaeological study of rock art then—and, arguably, to an extent now—had not much theory, no fully established and proven field methods, and was largely conducted by individuals. Bicknell worked with Luigi Pollini, his life-long personal servant and assistant, at Bego. Lester aptly concludes her chapter on Bicknell the archaeologist with Cartailhac's view of him:

> *he behaved like a naturalist of the terrain, trying to create thematic and analytical plates, in the way he knew best as a botanist* […] *This way of working does not allow us to classify him in the category of archaeologists of his time, who were generally more historians and antiquarians, but not as knowledgeable about the terrain as he was* (p. 128).

A long century after Bicknell's death, what do the archaeologists of our time do with rock art? Marretta's new monograph, astonishingly thorough, careful, attentive and observant—and also imaginative in the Bicknell manner—shows us. The rock art in Valcamonica was in Bicknell's day known to the people of the valley (who called the figures *pitoti* in their own Camunian dialect), but had not yet come to the attention of archaeologists. Archaeological study, when it came, was led by both Italian and German researchers in the inter-war years, and dismally mis-directed towards theory about prehistoric races. Valcamonica supplanted Bego as it became clear that the latter was a much-reduced miniature of the former, perhaps only a tenth of the number of figures in a tiny range of motifs from a small time period. There, the big impetus was the energy and impact of Emmanuel Anati. From the late 1950s until even today, his work set the model for field recording, and his broader vision, presented in *La civilisation du Val Camonica* (Anati 1960), was influential. Valcamonica is so rich in rock art that reports on its many recorded zones have not kept up with fieldwork; several important areas, such as Foppe di Nadro, Naquane and Paspardo, have not been fully published.

Marretta works in a much-updated and improved version of the Anati programme. The central recording method is tracing on plastic sheeting laid on the rock—thought to be undamaging as the metamorphic sandstone is robust, in contrast to the soft and crumbling surface bearing rock art in other regions. These drawings, made in patches, are then combined together; with the monograph is a splendid single drawing of the whole surface. This represents approximately 15 × 15m of figured rock and is very large even at the much reduced 1:20 scale. His book is well designed and published independently by the Parco di Seradina-Bedolina, one of the several Valcamonica parks for rock art, this one owned and managed by the local *commune*.

Marretta reports 1685 distinct figures on the surface, divided into 5 broad categories: amongst them, 585 human, 310 animal, 3 footprints, 13 images of artefacts, 337 clear geometric shapes; only 377 are blobs, irregular shapes, unclear or unrecognisable. In

Review

© Antiquity Publications Ltd, 2019

https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

well-judged sections showing a formidable knowledge of the vast number and range of Valcamonica figures, he explores striking categories and groups: the humans on horseback hunting deer with dogs; the scenes of ploughing and related sexual scenes; the birds; the many images of warriors, often fighting as opposed pairs; the few other animals; the very few figures of the kind interpreted by some as maps. In a more exploratory final section, he enquires whether there might be a 'Master of Serradina', a single artist like the 'Master of Paspardo' already hypothesised, with a hand sufficiently distinctive that his (or her, surely?) individual work can be recognised. Marretta fairly calls the surface a *capolavoro*, a masterpiece; but does a masterpiece imply a master?

Anati, from the 1960 book onwards, has given accounts of Valcamonica rock art as showing the roots of European civilisation, or even making a new kind of history for Europe. This is made possible, or radically assisted, if rock art really is an encoding of the human spirit that justifies strong, confident and very broad social inferences from the rare places such as Valcamonica, which are rich in ancient art. But surely this one valley's singular and very local habit of marking rocks with pitoti is just that, a singular but local habit that can be very informative but without itself having grand implications?

Looking ahead, what are and what should be key issues?

Figures cut into rock surfaces are by their nature three-dimensional, their cutting providing a third dimension of depth, yet recording is two-dimensional. And even a not quite plane surface such as Seradina 12 is itself a three-dimensional form in a very three-dimensional mountain valley. The 3D-PITOTI research programme has already developed methods in Valcamonica for the "3D acquisition, processing and presentation of prehistoric European rock-art".

Ever since Bicknell, the central aim has been to identify just what rock art pictures are pictures of: we still have mostly vague guesses, rather than systematics or semiotics of what the pictures mean. We need a closer interest in the relation between the complex 3D shape of the subject and its simplified image as seen from single or multiple viewpoints. There are good starting points in Margaret Hagen's model of the 'picture problem' and in the notion of 'aspective', long ago pioneered by the Egyptologists (Brunner-Traut 1974).

Just a glance at the fine enormous drawing of Seradina 12 shows how much information surely exists variously encoded: in its quite large areas without figures; in where the figures are concentrated; in how individual figures echo the forms of their neighbours. Some aspects Marretta acutely explores with his perceptive mentions of compositions, scenes and, perhaps, narrative. There is much more here to explore, analyse and understand!

The problem of art in archaeology, as noted by others, is that archaeologists lack the tools to address ancient art, while the art historians are, perhaps, too confined to the art object as a matter of art alone, and too influenced by the strange specifics of art in recent Western society. The images on Mont Bego and in Valcamonica, whose rational beauty Bicknell so grasped and expressed in designs he made from them, are still a profound problem. We know how to record, but using obsolete and oversimplifying 2D methods. Understanding eludes us. Is understanding impossible: as pictures are by their nature open, ambiguous, slippery, evasive? Or was Bicknell half-right: methods and insights derived from elsewhere—in his case, from botany—do help, but they are not enough. Who do we look to now? I think to ourselves: who else faces a sufficiently similar problem? The present writer is optimistic, especially if Marretta and like-minded colleagues find confidence to push forward strongly with new methods and fresh ideas.

References

Anati, E. 1960. *La civilisation du Val Camonica*. Paris: Arthaud.

Avery, G. 2016. *Clarence Bicknell's botanical exchanges*. Available at: https://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/clarence_bicknell_botanical_exchanges_avery.pdf (accessed 13 February 2019).

Brunner-Traut, E. 1974. Epilogue; aspective, in Heinrich Schäfer *Principles of Egyptian art* (translated and edited by John Baines): 424–43. Oxford: Clarendon.

Chippindale, C. 1984. Clarence Bicknell: archaeology and science in the 19th century. *Antiquity* 58: 185–93. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X0005626X

© Antiquity Publications Ltd, 2019

https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press