

*Defining a Regional Neolithic: the Evidence from Britain and Ireland*, edited by Kenneth Brophy & Gordon Barclay, 2009. Oxford: Oxbow Books. ISBN 987-1-84217-333-6 paperback £28 & US\$56; vii+128 pp., 54 figs., 2 tables

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It is fair to say this volume has had a long gestation as these papers are based on a meeting of the Neolithic Studies Group (NSG) held in London in November 2001, with the papers submitted in 2002 and finally published in 2009. The focus of that meeting was, as the title of this volume suggests, the question of regional diversity in Neolithic studies in Britain and Ireland, with a desire here to write 'alternative Neolithics' without over-reliance on the sequences of the 'usual suspects' of Orkney and Wessex. The aims of the NSG meeting and the volume were to address questions of how regional variation is present in the archaeological record of the Neolithic (and whether variations in material culture has a socially meaningful basis), whether boundaries between 'regions' can be identified and whether some regions are more significant than others.

Gordon Barclay in a short, but thought-provoking introduction, sets the context for the 2001 meeting. In it he suggests that prior to the 1970s and 1980s there was a dominant concept of a relatively unified British Neolithic, prompted by an overall lack of archaeological data, a reliance on antiquarian excavation in limited geographical areas, and the consequent spreading of interpretive narratives thinly due to a paucity of evidence, giving primacy to core areas at the expense of others. All of this sandwiched, Barclay argues, with a bias towards the English evidence at the expense of the other three nations of the British Isles (see Barclay 2001 for extended discussion of this topic). Barclay points out the importance of recognizing how the perceived importance of certain regions can be affected by modern-day political organization and stereotypes. However, the question might be asked as to whether some of the concerns

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expressed in Barclay's introduction are as relevant as they were even eight or nine years ago. For example, we now have much sounder evidence through better dating, for the rapidity of the adoption of certain aspects of what we classify as Neolithic, such as carinated bowl pottery which appears to occur across vast areas of Britain over a relatively short time period (Sheridan 2007). With evidence such as this it becomes harder to attribute primacy to any particular 'core' area, especially in an island context where innovation can spread rapidly and uni-directionally. Moreover, with the increased scale of developer-funded archaeology (particularly in the last decade), where there is much more arbitrariness to what is excavated and where, we are also beginning to get glimpses (and fuller pictures) of a more nuanced and diverse Neolithic(s) and with it archaeology on a landscape scale which (at least partly) removes the bias of the individual researcher (e.g. Thomas 2003; Cooney 2000; Lewis *et al.* 2006). There is no harm, however, in continually re-assessing how our assumptions about prehistory are influenced by modern traditions of scholarship and identity.

Proceedings of conferences are always subject to variable engagements with the proposed theme of the conference and this is the case with this volume, with uneven tackling of the questions posed by Barclay. The volume is loosely themed and grouped into three sections with Barclay's introduction and a chapter by Brophy on the problems and biases of distribution maps in the first section titled *Defining Regional Neolithics*. Distribution maps are of course the classic way of plotting regional (and wider trends) spreads of material culture, with their origins in culture history and therefore subject to the inherited biases of this tradition. Distribution maps are of course not all bad, for it is through the act of map creation that we can explore material culture in ways that can challenge assumed patterns, but as Brophy points out, whole regions or islands (e.g. Shetland is nearly always symbolically decapitated, if shown at all) can disappear in these maps and this can have the (un?)intentional result of implying a core versus a periphery. Make sure you read this paper, before you make or commission a distribution map again.

The second section is titled *Material Culture*. Here Roe's study of the regional character of querns fits well and is a useful study of an often neglected form of Neolithic artefact. Loveday's study of East Yorkshire sits less well, for while it considers regionally distinctive forms of material culture such as the Seamer axe it is more about the specifics of a regional landscape and the origin of particular regional practices, including monument construction. Loveday develops an interesting interpretation for the archaeological visibility of certain regions in the Neolithic as cult foci, where concentrations of non-local materials such as axes are a form of 'religiously sanctioned tribute' deposited within cult sites that drew on diverse audiences.

Inevitably the last theme *Regional and Local Studies* is the most densely populated, with six separate papers. Vicki Cummings opens the theme with a study of the landscape settings of megalithic monuments in southwest Wales and southwest Scotland. Here Cummings attempts to define groups of monuments by looking at the patterns

of landscape setting; here Cummings is keen to point out the occurrence of shared practices at both the local level and homologies that extended to a much larger scale, across the Irish Sea between the two study areas. In Cummings' study I did find it difficult to fully judge the arguments she was presenting as the graphs presented for the visual characteristics of each 'group' did not do so in a standardized format, instead different categories were plotted for each group. I do like the approach however, and landscape setting will be a fundamental part of how we categorise classes of monuments and regional and local groupings in the future.

Aaron Watson and Richard Bradley in their paper, highlight the potential connections between two regions, Cumbria and East Ireland, separated by the sea. As Tom Clare points out in the following paper, we are hampered in regions such as Cumbria by a dearth of excavated and dated sites, and this is obviously a major impediment in constructing regional narratives, for if your only option is to date sites by comparison then this automatically means that the region in question is already seen through the lens of another. Despite this, Watson and Bradley create a compelling narrative that cleverly links the spatial layout of monuments and rock-art sites in the Neolithic with wider conceptions of the topography of Cumbria and East Ireland. However, as the authors point out the question of chronology is essential and it remains to be seen what the chronological relationships are between the sites in Ireland and those in Cumbria, and whether the primacy of Irish traditions that are highlighted as a major influence in this paper on the development of monumentality in Cumbria, is borne out by future excavation and dating.

Tom Clare in his paper uses finer-grained data, including fieldwalking data to highlight other regional links that were important in the prehistory of Cumbria, including lowland Scotland, highlighting the difficulty in identifying clear boundaries across various forms of material culture through time. The attention then turns southwards in Patrick Clay's paper with a consideration of the Neolithic of the East Midlands. In some ways Clay's paper is a useful rundown of the evidence from this region, but Clay also makes important points about the representativeness of the evidence we draw on, which have wider implications. Clay highlights the fact that one part of his region, Northamptonshire, for example, has been heavily impacted upon by modern agriculture and development with only 2 to 3 per cent of the landscape remaining unploughed and undeveloped. If you compare that to the better-preserved landscapes of Orkney or Wessex then it is clear that we are not comparing like with like and this is of course a major problem in creating alternative regional Neolithic narratives.

The volume ends with two papers on Ireland by Gabriel Cooney and Carleton Jones. Cooney considers a series of islands off the coast of Dublin. Cooney highlights the potential 'specialness' of these islands, and the evidence from these islands are undoubtedly interesting, but for me the question of representativeness is raised here again. Cooney uses Bradley's gauge of the significance of natural places: deposition, embellishment of natural features and use of materials from these places for significant objects

as a means of assessing the importance of these islands (Bradley 2000, 36), and while the islands under question undoubtedly show these elements, can we really say this is anything unusual in the wider Neolithic world? On the other hand, this paper is not meant to be a definitive statement, more an exploration of a number of important issues, and Cooney's paper has an elegant discussion on the wider significance of islandness. Jones's final paper is relatively brief, but highlights an essential approach to regionality, assessing the influence of large-scale landscape features on the nature of communication. While this has the potential to be deterministic, its usefulness is borne out when actual patterns are assessed in relation to the models created through examining geography, routeways and the potential of maritime connectivity.

All in all, while this is an interesting volume, inevitably it raises more questions about regionality than it perhaps answers, but this is an essential issue to address if we are to write more representative narratives of the Neolithic. There has been a growing awareness of the diversity of the Neolithic archaeological record and this has prompted many regional studies in recent years. However, regionalism can produce a sense of isolation, both in the past and in the present and it is of course also important to account for the ways in which regions interacted to make up Neolithic society as a whole through an examination of broader historical trajectories. However, with the explosions in data that have come about in recent years with developer funding a wider perspective becomes more and more of a challenge, in this respect detailed regional narratives will be the essential building blocks in understanding the wider Neolithic picture in the coming years.

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