

Book Reviews

The Idea of Order in Review

Richard Bradley, *The Idea of Order: The Circular Archetype in Prehistoric Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. £67 (cloth).

Any new book by Richard Bradley is eagerly awaited, not only because he is so respected as an archaeologist, but because his books are well researched, rich with pertinent examples and written in a style which manages to be both authoritative and accessible to the reader. His latest book, *The Idea of Order: The Circular Archetype in Prehistory*, is no exception. What is exceptional is that, in the wealth of literature that has been written about prehistory in general, and the Neolithic and Bronze Age in particular, he has managed to look at the period from a new angle, one which explores the prehistoric conception of space. There is a growing acceptance that space and place is important in the location of prehistoric buildings and reports of excavations increasingly locate finds within the landscape. Richard Bradley takes this an ambitious step further by examining patterns of dwellings and monuments throughout prehistoric Europe.

Bradley explores the idea of the circular archetype by drawing on many fine examples of circular monuments and dwellings constructed in prehistoric Europe. He links the use of this circular design to curvilinear motifs found on rock art and portable artefacts. He eschews Jung's specialised use of the term archetype and even the spiritual dimension suggested by Eliade and defines it as "an original model or prototype" on which other examples are based' simply 'to suggest the ubiquity of circular forms in prehistoric architecture and the design of objects'. He further theorises that the choice of linear or curvilinear buildings gives rise to or is informed by distinctive perceptions of the world. Throughout the book he uses case studies to illustrate the phenomenon as a whole. The case studies are accompanied by clear and precise plans and drawings, which add clarity to the text.

To look at the complete range of dwellings and monuments in such a large area as prehistoric Europe with its regional differences of culture and

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terrain and to do this for a period stretching over millennia is a massive undertaking but Bradley's material is clearly organised into different sections and chapters so the reader is able to follow his purpose. He firstly introduces the subject of circular houses and looks at those parts of Europe where this 'circular perception of space' existed for the longest period. He then considers the architecture of domestic dwellings and relates them to the forms of larger monuments. By contrast he also looks at circular structures in areas where rectilinear architecture was the norm and finally looks at the period when the circular archetype was abandoned.

His approach shows how archaeological theory has developed. In the 1970s and 1980s he says that archaeologists focused on the distinction between mobility and sedentism and functionalists were concerned with subsistence, ecology, and the political economy. However the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas had a major influence on archaeology theorists by her introduction of ethnography to explain the meanings and significance of domestic space. Through a gradual process culminating perhaps in Binford's (2001) *Constructing Frames of Reference*, which favours an 'analytical method for archaeology theory building, using ethnographic and environmental date sets', there has been a shift from a purely functional model to a broader spectrum which now considers the interpretation of circular structures in terms of systems of belief.

Bradley believes these theories can complement one another and he offers a mixture of practical, pragmatic reasons for circular dwellings alongside a cosmological approach to explain the worldview of these early builders. Stating that 'perceptions of space are as varied as other parts of human culture', he explains the differences between the perceptions of dwellers in open hilly country and those of woodland dwellers. In open country—and more particularly open country which has higher vantage points—most groups are able to view the entire dome of the sky and can identify where the earth meets the heavens and where both touch the sky. He continues by saying that as part of that process they become especially aware of the movements of the sun and moon. Without speculating on an exact belief he gives examples of monuments which are aligned to celestial movements, particularly sunrise or sunset at the solstices. Living within the environment of a circular horizon and under the circular dome of the sky the circular architecture reflects the builders' awareness of space. On the other hand, communities who live in woodland where the horizon and sky are obscured may be less aware of the heavenly bodies and their notions of space can be dominated by the importance of certain directions such as paths or trails. He concludes that two different ways of viewing space

would have developed: for some it would be essentially linear, a world of directions and for others space would have been curvilinear extending to the horizon in a space where this circular configuration was mirrored by the dome of the sky. He goes on to cite examples where dwellings mirror their inhabitants' cosmology and says that the houses 'offer interpretations of the ideas on which the natural order depends'. He continues by quoting from Cauvin's (2000) *The Birth of the Gods and the Origins of Agriculture* to say that rectangles are rare in nature and represent that which has been fashioned and made concrete. Bradley's ideas on these two differing perceptions of space mark a breakthrough in ideas about prehistoric architecture and need to be borne in mind throughout the rest of the book.

Bradley then goes on to look in detail at the round dwellings and monuments which characterise much of prehistoric Europe, comparing them with rectilinear dwellings and long mounds, which are also widely distributed. He also looks at the pottery for the period and notices that the settlers in the rectilinear buildings associated with the Linear Pottery Culture of Neolithic Central and Northern Europe chose curvilinear designs with which to decorate their pottery and observes that the later metal artefacts were also decorated with circles and spirals. By contrast, in Britain and Ireland where the buildings were circular the Grooved Ware of the period is decorated with predominantly angular designs. Beaker pottery, adopted later, is also decorated by incised linear patterns, yet their main deposition was at circular sites. These regional differences are also found in the shapes of chambered cairns in Europe which are predominantly circular apart from Central Europe where they are rectangular. He says that the clear distinction and the contrast between rectilinear and curvilinear forms is rarely observed and more rarely discussed, yet it is found very widely. This book certainly attempts to fill this gap though the evidence is sometimes confusing. Bradley admits that sometimes there is a problem with chronology, as despite the similarities of design between dwellings and monuments they tended to have been built at different times as much as a century apart.

If there is a failing in the work, it is simply the scale of the area examined, the differences in construction and materials employed and the traditions that influenced them over the millennia spanned by prehistory. That houses tended to be built in timber, which has a limited life-span and leaves less of a footprint for archaeological excavation, whereas the tombs associated with them were built in stone, illustrates part of the problem.

The book looks at current archaeological method and theory, if only implicitly. Once hampered by the confines of the Three Age system,

modern archaeological research looks more closely at transitions and what they mean both in practical, economic terms and also the effect on society and beliefs. The nature of archaeological excavation is particular and detailed and rarely applicable to sites other than the one being investigated, yet Bradley feels that 'some of the most useful observations have been neglected in the search for general principles'. Instead he uses his numerous and carefully described examples as building blocks towards a general picture from which he draws his conclusions. He suggests that the design of domestic dwellings was used as a prototype for monumental designs. That does not fit completely with the other evidence he presents of monuments often being directed towards the sun at the turning points of the year or that they occupied special places in the landscape. It would appear that while archaeologists increasingly take account of ethnography, archaeoastronomy, and sacred geography, there has not been a complete integration as yet.

His discussion of Uisneach in Ireland is pertinent at this point. Uisneach, which has been identified as the centre of Ireland, is a plateau-topped hill that dominates the view from all directions. It contains at least twenty ancient monuments including circular enclosures, a megalithic tomb, a round mound, a circular ditched enclosure, and a considerable number of small circular barrows or ring ditches. Despite saying that the circular archetype as described in the book does not equate to Eliade's definition, Bradley expresses the idea (without using Eliade's term *axis mundi*) that the monuments on Uisneach could have been microcosms of the land around it. Discussing the round tells in Romania, he refers to his earlier work, *The Significance of Monuments* (1998), by saying that 'in a sense they *ritualised* the features of settlements of a kind that had been occupied in the past and, in doing so, they invested these forms with a new significance'. Additionally while describing the roundels of Hungary, he suggests that the many possibilities for their form of construction could be the movements of the sun and the moon, the contrast between day and night and the passage of the seasons on which life depends.

Bradley continues his assessment by looking at the juxtaposition of circular and rectangular buildings saying that it seems unlikely that any one model can accommodate all the available evidence. By going from individual sites and looking at a larger pattern there is some evidence that they were sited at important parts of the landscape where routes met. Alternatively it could have been an expression of the demarcation of sacred and profane space. Additionally he thinks that the juxtaposition in the Netherlands and south Scandinavia shows a duality which implies that

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there was a rite of passage from the houses of the living to the houses of the dead. In Bronze Age Scandinavia there was a three-tier cosmology which explained the relationship of the land, the sea, and the sky. The sun rose from the water and travelled across the land until it set, then it was taken in a boat underneath the earth during the night to the place where it rose again in the morning. Circular motifs thought to represent the sun are also present there.

Bradley looks at how the use of circular buildings went out of use and associates this transition with outside influences. In Ireland these influences were Norse, and it is significant that the last to change were the Gaelic-speaking areas. He says it was slow to die out because the circular ordering of space as evidenced by the buildings retained its power. The images were respected and even renewed because they included elements that seemed important and that because the circular layout of the house was identified with a wider system of belief, it would have been difficult to adopt another style of dwelling.

Having examined all the evidence, he draws a map of prehistoric Europe showing the dual character expressed in the buildings. Circular buildings feature strongly in those regions which were connected by the sea. In Central and Northern Europe where there were more land connections, there was a preference for rectilinear buildings and round burial mounds. Thus there is a clear division between these two areas, and Bradley hints that this was because of the way the two areas adopted farming practices. Central and Northern Europe were colonised by farming communities whereas the coastal areas had more indigenous development. This would have led to a sense of regional identity which reinforced their forms, and it was only when their lands were taken over by Roman, Saxon, Viking, or Norman invaders that their circular worldview was overthrown.

In Richard Bradley's summing up, it is disappointing that he does not refer back to his innovative contrast between open landscape and wooded interiors, which in this reviewer's opinion underpins the detail of the book. Instead he leaves us with tantalising questions: Were the locations chosen because they conformed to a particular idea of order? Did the circular monuments epitomise a circular conception of space?

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