REVIEW


This volume represents the first major academic synthesis of the Scottish Neolithic for many years. Much has changed, even since the mid-1990s synthetic works of Patrick Ashmore (1996) and Gordon Barclay (1998). In particular, the impact of commercial sector rescue excavation has transformed the ways in which we now see the lowland Scottish Neolithic. The archetypal, stone-built monuments of Orkney no longer dominate our picture of Neolithic life and death in Scotland as they once did. The tireless work of Gordon Barclay, in pressing the case for the importance of the eastern Scottish material, has been crucial in this regard, and has paved the way for the approach taken in this volume. Nonetheless, the author brings a great deal of his own vision to the study.

Chronologically the book encompasses the Earlier Neolithic, from around 4000 – 3300 BC, and the Later Neolithic, from 3300 – 2500 BC, terminating with the beginnings of the Beaker tradition in Scotland. Noble sets out his main themes early on. Perhaps most important is the evident tension between the manifest regional variation of the Scottish Neolithic, and the need to develop narratives on much grander national, and international, scales. A second theme is the explicit desire to break away from the perceived Orcadian bias of much previous work. The shadow of the spectacularly preserved monuments of the northern archipelago, such as the great tomb of Maes Howe and the extraordinary settlement of Skara Brae, lies heavily across the volume.

The main chapters are structured by monument type. Thus, after a discussion of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition, Noble devotes individual chapters to timber structures, earthen barrows, megalithic monuments, and later complexes dominated by henges and related forms. The focus on monuments, in both the structure and content of the book, inevitably means that other aspects
of Neolithic life are a little under-played. Material culture, for example, does not figure a great deal, except as an adjunct to the discussion of the role of monuments and monumental architecture. Although this perhaps prevents the book from being as complete a synthesis of Neolithic Scotland as its title might imply, it does at least enable the author to do justice to the remarkable monumental landscapes which form such a major feature of the period. Noble clearly leans heavily towards post-processual interpretations, being particularly influenced by British scholars of the period, notably Richard Bradley, Julian Thomas and Colin Richards. This is no bad thing, and he develops some of their ideas along some new and interesting lines.

One of the most successful parts of the book for me was the discussion in Chapter 2 of the importance of ‘technologies of the sea’ in affecting the course of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Scotland. The debate over the relative importance of colonisation versus indigenous adoption in the introduction of Neolithic lifestyles to Scotland has been a prolonged and bitter one, and it is helpful to have a fresh perspective. Essentially Noble argues for the primacy of the west coast, Atlantic sea routes as conduits for the introduction of new life-ways, with a more gradual subsequent seepage eastwards across the Scottish land mass. From this background, the Neolithic develops quite differently in the two areas. Atlantic Scottish communities develop traditions more akin to those of Ireland and other regions connected to them by the sea. Eastern Scotland, by contrast, is characterised by shifting patterns of mobile settlement more like those of the preceding Mesolithic. The east-west divide is also marked by the broad distribution of earth and timber versus stone-built monuments throughout the Neolithic. Whilst it hardly answers all the questions, this sort of approach has much to commend it as a starting point for a more nuanced interpretation of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Scotland.

In later chapters, Noble again discusses the importance of route-ways in structuring the location of monumental complexes. He convincingly outlines the ways in which these complexes, as at Dunragit in the south-west, or Dunadd in Kintyre, might represent the periodic gathering points of otherwise dispersed, small-scale communities. Sea routes and major water-courses again seem to be crucial, and especially porterages which enabled travellers to by-pass difficult stretches of sea, as around the Mull of Kintyre (Dunragit) and Mull of Galloway (Dunadd). Here,
Noble usefully develops the ideas of earlier scholars, including Andrew Sherratt’s work on the role of river transport in determining the prominence of Wessex from the Neolithic onwards.

Another impressive aspect of the volume is the way in which the author has incorporated work in the commercial sector into his wider narratives, for the lowland Neolithic in particular. Sites like Beckton, Dibton Farm, Spurryhilllock and Blairhall Burn, represent the kind of individually ephemeral, unimposing, non-monumental sites that seldom attracted any serious archaeological attention prior to the 1990s when the first Scottish archaeological units emerged. Together they show the great advantages to be gained by working without a research agenda! What emerges is a convincing picture of small-scale shifting settlement in the east, in landscapes punctuated by occasional monumental constructions of earth and timber. Major structures like the Claish and Balbride timber halls are clearly not parts of widespread distributions of large houses; indeed there seems to be no middle ground between these enormous barn-sized buildings and the far smaller transient structures of which Kinbeachie in the Black Isle is probably the best-preserved representative. It is an important step to have brought all this material together for the first time. One could suggest that certain icons of the Scottish Neolithic, notably the chambered cairns of the north and west, are given rather short shrift. Clearly, however, this is part of Noble’s attempt to rectify the imbalances of previous narratives.

I would challenge some of the assumptions made at various points in the volume. In Chapter 3, for example Noble discusses at length the evidence for the frequent and destructive burning of timber structures, such as cursus monuments and timber halls. This he sees in exclusively ‘ritual’ terms. Yet, when one looks at the ethnographic parallels for small-scale agricultural societies, the obvious mechanism for such repetitive destruction must surely be inter-communal violence and warfare. Despite the recent recognition of the presence and impact of inter-personal violence in the British Neolithic (e.g. Schulting and Wysocki 2005), these issues are nowhere considered. As a result, Noble’s Neolithic seems unnaturally peaceable.

Despite its clear merits, it is impossible to avoid mentioning problems in the production and editing of the volume. Indeed the author has been quite seriously let down by very some rather poor production values, all the more depressing for being the work of a major University press. Slack copy-editing has left mistakes
throughout and the academic apparatus of the book leaves much to be desired. Some of the bibliographical entries are inaccurate (Patrick Ashmore’s important synthesis, for example, has the wrong title) and the index is woeful. A random analysis of page 68, for example, reveals discussion of sites at Kirkburn, Douglassmuir and Holywood, each of which is indeed listed in the index, but none of them for the relevant page. The illustrations sometimes appear to have reproduced at more or less random sizes, so that Figure 2.2, for example, is absurdly small, while others appear much larger than the line quality can bear. Illustration content is also problematic in places. On the rather crucial distribution map, Figure 1.6, most of the symbols are missing from the key (only two appear and at least four are missing) leaving the non-specialist reader high and dry. For me, Figure 2.1 (a photograph of some waves labelled ‘the tides and currents of the sea’) is the sort of thing that gives post-processualism a bad name. The near-full-page tree-picture, Figure 4.19 (labelled ‘the forest’), likewise represents post-processualism at its most touchy-feely, but curiously seems to depict a stand of Scandinavian conifers rather than any species likely to have been present in Neolithic Scotland.

Despite these problems, this remains a very worthwhile volume which will be especially useful to students and others approaching the Neolithic of Scotland for the first time. It very usefully draws together the results of recent work in the commercial sector and situates these in the context of academic debate. It also provides a timely corrective to previous accounts biased towards the Orcadian sequence.

References
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Ian Armit,
University of Bradford