

Jan Harding, *Cult, Religion and Pilgrimage: Archaeological Investigations at the Neolithic and Bronze Age Monument Complex of Thornborough, North Yorkshire*, with contributions by Lindsay Allason-Jones, Arnold Aspinall, Alan Biggins, Ed Dennison, Sarah Groves, Benjamin Johnson, Robert Johnston, Eva Laurie, Peter Makey, Simon Mays, Roger Martlew, Joshua Pollard, Armin Schmidt, Kristian Strutt and Blaise Vyner

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For archaeological interest you are spoilt for choice in the Thornborough landscape of North Yorkshire. Apart from its three impressive henges, there is a long cursus, groups of round barrows, oval and rectangular enclosures and a double pit alignment. It is a landscape that was used in prehistory from the Mesolithic to the Bronze Age and thus it is a daunting task to establish chronology, motivations for use and changes in ideology and then produce a coherent synthesis. Yet this is what Harding has done, with contributions from his colleagues.

The Thornborough Research Report is based on the results of two field projects at the Neolithic and Bronze Age monument complex which set out a scenario for a new interpretation of this impressive site. The main focus visually is the line of three massive henges which together represent one of the largest earthmoving episodes in the late Neolithic period in Britain. These double-entranced henges were enclosed by double-ditches and associated with an earlier cursus. Their systematic investigation took place over a long ten-year period and the report charts Thornborough's growth from a relatively modest fourth millennium monument into what Harding (p. 2) suggests is a "regional 'hub'". Located on a shelf of Permian limestone and marl between the Vale of Mowbray to the east and the Pennine hills to the west, the landscape is topographically different from its surrounding areas. It is bounded by river ways to the south and wetlands to the north and is also close to thick beds of gypsum, a resource which was found to be

incorporated into the monuments. The henges, which are the fifth-largest monuments of their kind in Britain, are in close proximity to a triple-ditched round barrow dated earlier than the henges, at least ten round barrows and a later pit alignment, as well as several enclosures and many unexcavated archaeological anomalies. The henges themselves were carefully positioned along an axis with the central monument being built on an existing cursus which is also part of the study. Although less researched than other parts of Neolithic Britain, Yorkshire is home to several clusters of monuments which provide evidence of the use of favoured locations or “ritual landscapes” (p. 2).

Generally, elsewhere in Britain, such sites have been interpreted as representing a stratified society, being “centres for the social, religious and economic life of each of the chiefdoms” (p. 5), with sacred spaces separating the rulers from the ruled. Harding says this view has become unconsciously embedded in our view of later Neolithic society, but he points out that the monuments in Yorkshire display different characteristics from those found elsewhere, particularly Wessex from which the model was derived. Instead of being widely spaced, half the known monuments are located along a 12-km stretch of the River Ure. As an alternative to central spaces, Harding cites Loveday’s (1998) proposal that they might be located along a “pilgrims’ routeway”. Here it is clear that Harding is advocating a movement away from the one-size-fits-all approach to general narratives on the Neolithic in favour of a more phenomenological study of related monuments *vis-à-vis* Thornborough, and this is reminiscent of Bradley’s (2005) study of three Recumbent Stone Circles in Scotland. Harding stresses that we should focus on “the specific *tensions, intentions and motivations* of local and regional systems” (p. 6).

Thornborough belongs to one of the rarer instances in archaeology where a large henge is directly associated with an earlier ceremonial focus, in this case the cursus. This could be alternatively read as evidence of long-term stability or an attempt to subvert the meaning of the earlier sites. Harding maintains that it is at sites such as these that “beliefs were most fully represented, articulated and negotiated” (p. 8), so there is a tie between religious and socio-political activity. He says that there is never one “correct” interpretation of what these places represent, so archaeological accounts usually focus on the materiality of specific rituals and avoid discussion of religion. Ritual operates within a “thick” context of which religion is a vital part. Most studies which consider materiality as purely symbolic fail to engage with the numinous, intangible essence of religion. In this respect Harding cites Jones’ (2000) idea of double mediation, whereby monuments will at the same time appeal to shared values and traditions yet will disrupt or challenge these to achieve spiritual renewal. In this way Harding theorizes that monuments can be seen as embodying change. Whilst architecturally they may represent an *imago mundi*, this initial phase is taken over by subsequent transactions of meaning and transformative experiences which may satisfy several different religious roles. He draws on ethnographic evidence from indigenous peoples to demonstrate that one site can fulfil these many different functions. One senses that he is displeased by the “disparity between many of our archaeological narratives and the lived experience of sacred architecture [... where religious experience...] attempts to appease, assuage, make peace with or otherwise strategically negotiate with the gods” (p. 11). The importance of

propitiation is spelled out by historians of religion and anthropologists yet hardly enters archaeological literature and Harding stresses that we need to focus on the intricate religious mechanisms which produced the Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments. Whilst we can gain an insight into socio-political history, these monuments were nevertheless steeped in deep-rooted spiritual concerns. Not only that, but we need to understand the idea of sacred landscapes, which Harding (p. 11) describes as “*contested places* or localities for division, fragmentation, and social tension”.

It would seem that there is a tension between what archaeologists can actually do and what they would like to create. Harding’s report attempts to address both aims. Importantly, the chapters give a detailed account of the archaeological excavations carried out over the ten-year period. The “Vale of Mowbray Neolithic Landscape Project” (VMNLP) originally set out to investigate all six henges along the Ure, but was narrowed down to the three henges at Thornborough and their surrounding landscape: a 4-km by 3-km study area over five seasons of summer fieldwork, followed by two years of large-scale excavation of the double pit alignment. In addition, there was an earthwork survey of the northern henge and a geophysical survey of the southern henge and pit alignment, together with the “Prospection in Alluvial Environments Project”. Allied to this was the “Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund Project” to provide further information about the survival and preservation of the prehistoric archaeology to help future strategic planning. The results of other smaller related investigations were also included in the report. The book is beautifully illustrated throughout with photographs, clear plans, maps and diagrams and remarkably detailed drawings of lithics.

The excavations addressed fundamental issues of chronology and structural sequence. Harding suggests that the Three Hills round barrow was the earliest monument to be constructed at Thornborough, and their largest element of finds are Mesolithic or early Neolithic. However, in common with normal problems of excavation, it is difficult to ascertain whether the finds were contemporary with the barrow or a residual component represented in the plough-disturbed horizon. The initial manipulation of dead body parts found within and the use of gypsum speak of symbolic novelty. The next phase of construction was a now-flattened cursus, the cropmark of which runs for 1.2 km on a southwest to northeast axis. This was followed by the construction of the three massive henges for which the overall alignment, which is on a northwest to southeast axis, would have been 1.7 km long and at right angles to the cursus. West of the southern henge is a double pit alignment running north-northeast to south-southwest for over 350 m. In addition, two oval enclosures, ten round barrows and five additional ring-ditches have also been recorded with an intriguing number of axes to the main henge monuments. There were few remains that could be accurately radiocarbon dated. The triple ditched ring barrow yielded dates for the first half of the fourth millennium and the double pit alignment gave second-millennium early Bronze Age dates.

Harding says that the cursus gives an impression of a monument which deliberately straddled a landscape discernible to those areas beyond its terminals. The superimposition of the central henge at right angles to the cursus suggests a “symbolic geometry” (p. 43) and the central henge is marginally more elevated than the other two henges. The

three henges are homogeneous in size and circular layout. The entrances to the henges, which vary in width, are aligned northwest to southeast but not exactly on the same axis, being $143^{\circ}/323^{\circ}$, $145^{\circ}/325^{\circ}$ and $155^{\circ}/327^{\circ}$ respectively. Harding says these variations were deliberate but no further explanation is given for the differences. The appearance and purpose of the outer ditch was very different from that of the inner bank and ditch, and it is suggested that the inner banks were coated in gypsum, which again speaks of symbolism. However, the evidence for a symbolic geometry between the round barrows and the henges is less convincing than that of the cursus to the central henge, but their placement makes an obvious contribution to the ritual landscape. The double pit alignment is judged as a later Neolithic timber avenue and exhibits very different architecture from Thornborough's other monuments. Although there are many different relationships to explore in conjunction with the other unexcavated finds, it is notable how different the plateau is from its hinterland which is void of monuments. In Harding's words (p. 61) it is "a topographically bounded area across which religiosity was firmly embedded".

At Thornborough no attempt was made to evaluate the full extent of Neolithic and Bronze Age archaeology across the entire plateau and Harding admits that this failure limits what can realistically be said about the complex's use and development. In this it is no different from most archaeological reports which necessarily have to infer overall use from partial investigations. What is engaging in this book is Harding's reflexivity and his willingness to share ideas on what could have been done better. Similarly, he contextualizes his results through reference to other authors' findings elsewhere in Britain.

To synthesize all the archaeological data into an engaging narrative requires some artistry and skill, which Harding clearly has in abundance. This is not just a fact-based research report. Harding uses the opportunity to highlight problems which affect all archaeological sites, notably the difficulty of working on sites which have been used differently throughout their lifetimes, and the destructiveness of farming techniques which inadvertently stir up the different layers of stratification. He also addresses conservation issues and interpretative matters. To this he adds his own interpretation of ritual landscape, symbolic geometry, sacred geography and pilgrimage. Last but not least is an archaeoastronomical hypothesis.

Having considered the religious possibilities of the landscape through its monuments, waterways and geology, Harding (p. 210) then turns to what he terms the "overworld" or the sky. Within the arena of the henges the landscape would have been obscured, giving predominance to the skyscape, and there might have been a link between the gypsum and the brilliance of the stars. The full archaeoastronomical analysis was published in the journal *Archaeoastronomy* (Harding *et al.* 2006), so a relatively brief summary of the results is given in this book. The eastern end of the cursus was aligned on the risings of Mirfax and Pollux between 3500 and 3000 BC and the western end framed the settings of seven stars which included Alnitak, Alnilam and Mintaka, the stars which form Orion's Belt. Given the width of the henges' entrances and no obvious foresights, there were 12 stars rising and ten setting at the entrance windows between 3000 and 2000 BC. One of these was Sirius within the southern entrance for all three henges at 3000 BC. Addi-

tionally the southern entrances of the northern and central henges are aligned on the midwinter solstice sunrise in the later Neolithic. Of course it is difficult to assess whether these alignments were intentional but Harding suggests other evidence in favour of this idea. Firstly, Orion's Belt would have risen in the direction of the Yorkshire Wolds, the final destination for numerous axes and possibly the homeworld from where many of the worshippers came, and secondly, the periods of first visibility for Orion's Belt would have coincided with harvest time and autumn until spring, when it disappears; both times which mark a distinct difference in the seasonal landscape. Of course the people would have been aware of the seasons but the ritual observation of celestial phenomena would have ensured harmony between land and sky. His findings demonstrate "the close relationship between skyscape and life-cycles, a connection anchored by the monuments themselves" (p. 214).

It seems unfair to criticize a book which has engaged so well with different disciplinary perspectives, but a few words are necessary here. I must stress that they apply to most archaeological narratives, not just this one. From an archaeoastronomer's point of view it is frustrating that crucial data is omitted. In order to test alignment hypotheses it is necessary to know geographical coordinates, the azimuths of the axes and horizon altitude, and these are rarely stated. Similarly, archaeologists are vague about compass points: the terms "north", "south", "east" and "west" are used to refer to general directions and it is never clear from an archaeological plan whether "north" means "true north", "compass north" or "map north". Harding unusually gives the azimuths of the main henge alignments but they are missing for the double pit alignment, which cries out for archaeoastronomical analysis. However, he must be applauded for including a summary of his earlier archaeoastronomical study in what is an archaeological report and hopefully it signals a change whereby skyscape archaeology becomes part and parcel of an archaeological assessment.

Beyond the book's archaeological claims there is a lesson to be learnt. Harding shows how the project engaged the local community, who, through lobbying, managed to get the attention of the *Guardian*, which resulted in a planning refusal for commercial quarrying. There was further advertising of Thornborough in a BBC Two programme entitled *The Stonehenge of the North*. In order to preserve our monuments, out there in the landscape, rather than in paper reports generated from subsequently back-filled sites, this engagement with the public is crucial.

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