

## Reviews

*It must be understood that all statements and opinions in reviews are those of the respective authors, not of the Society or of the Editor.*

George Terence Meaden, *The Goddess of the Stones: the Language of the Megaliths*. Souvenir Press, 1991. Pp. 224, illustrations. Price £18.99.

Over ten years ago I was asked to review a clutch of books on megaliths in general, Stonehenge in particular. At the time I wrote: 'Stonehenge attracts charlatans, quacks, gulls, mountebanks, fakes and publishers as a rhinoceros attracts tick-birds. Latter-day druids, ley-line hunters, UFO-spotters and Atlantis-seekers all claim it as their own'. Times change, but those immutable stones continue to be transmuted by fashion; every age gets the Stonehenge it deserves. So what is the explanation for the 90s offered by George Terence Meaden?

What else but crop-circles, and an English obsession with the weather, whisked with a dash of mild feminism. I should declare an interest, or lack of one. In twenty years of taking and studying aerial photographs I have observed little that could be classed as a crop circle. Consequently I find it difficult to see these recent stalwarts of the silly-season newspapers as the prime movers of British prehistory. This is not the case with Dr. Meaden, physicist and founder of the Tornado and Storm Research Organisation. His pursuit of crop circles is indefatigable and his belief in their significance unshakeable.

To be fair to Dr. Meaden he is not one of the lunatic fringe. Since 1980 he claims to have studied over a thousand circle phenomena. His explanation for the flattened spirals of corn, occasionally grass, is rational: a vortex of air rotating about a vertical axis which, unlike a conventional whirlwind, strikes downward. Thankfully there are no UFOs in sight. Nevertheless he does not address the obvious question of why 'scientists have only become aware of the exceptional meteorological phenomena' since 1980 and why he could record 73 circles in 1987 and 700 in 1990. Is this the result of an increased level of observation, fakery encouraged by front-page publicity, or some recent phenomena like global warming or aircraft pollution?

This we are not told. We are, however, asked to believe that the crop-circle phenomena had a fundamental impact on Neolithic societies. The spiral-circles in the crops were so awe-inspiring for ancient farmers that they 'promptly assumed sacrosanct status' – an embodiment of the vulva of the Great Goddess, 'opened for the purpose of releasing the spirits of the dead'. Well, maybe yes, maybe no.

Oddly Dr. Meaden makes no mention of the book which has been over much of this ground before, O.G.S. Crawford's *The Eye Goddess* (1957), which also interpreted the stone-carved circles and spirals of British prehistory in terms of a goddess cult, but one derived from the Near East, and in particular from the so-called Eye Temple excavated by Max Mallowan at Tell Brak in Syria. Crawford's 'ex-oriente lux' theory has been

overshadowed by the radio-carbon revolution. It is interesting, however, to compare the confidence with which both Crawford and Meaden interpret some of the most difficult data from British prehistory, the decoration of Boyne Valley tombs.

For Crawford, 'these double circles with rays between their circumferences' are so obviously meant for eyes that 'comparisons seem hardly necessary to prove it'. But for Meaden, 'On the basis of spiral images the myth expressed is quite clear. The Great Goddess gives birth to the crescent moon or Moon Goddess following three days of obscurity, and later, after her journey around the heavens, the Moon Goddess returns to the womb of the Great Goddess to undergo renewed incubation and rebirth'. With precise interpretation like this Dr. Meaden seems to have his own ultrasonic scanner of the past. For the averagely sceptical reader, however, a major suspension of disbelief is required.

Archaeology has shown a welcome revival of interest in human thought and symbolism. But symbols are variable and difficult to decode. They may also be deliberately mysterious rather than transparent. Spirals and circles, for example, appear as abstract symbols in many places at many times. The possible number of meanings can be almost infinite. Dr. Meaden's interpretations at times seem far-fetched but they are also curiously simplistic. For him the cup and ring marks of Northern Britain are literally a registry of births where hardy northern ladies sat 'bare-bottomed to allow the fertilising spirit to pass from the rock into her womb' because, we are told, 'in early societies it was believed that the union of a man and a woman was not enough to produce a child'. This is to underestimate both the ancient knowledge of gynaecology and the human ability to create myths which have meaning within society.

Interestingly, cup and rings, spirals and circles are found on rocks in Amazonia which are associated with the female posterior: we happen to know the relevant myth (G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Amazonia Cosmos: the Sexual and Religious Symbolism of the Tukano Indian* (1971), 169). The Sun father committed incest with his daughter who had not reached puberty. This is the greatest of sins among the local people and is a myth of extreme importance for them. The crime took place at Wainambi Rapids and the marks in the rocks, both carved and natural, are reminders of the violation: the impression of the girl's buttocks, red spots of blood, and holes where she urinated. A preying mantis witnessed the violation and denounced the crime by blowing a trumpet. A circle or spiral on the rocks marked the spot where he placed the trumpet. The purpose of this myth, of which this is just an element, and its associated ritual, is to emphasise that while incest is prohibited, other sexual relations are permitted. Archaeologists need to appreciate the limits both of their evidence and their own deductive powers.

Just as Dr. Meaden underestimates the sophistication of myth-making so his view of Neolithic society is simplistic, 'a world of peaceful co-existence . . . overthrown by sword-wielding invaders who devised, for . . . the exploitation of the female half of the population, the unforgiving gods of war'. This is to ignore the obvious evidence for aggression from the British Neolithic and to simplify the role of female deities. There is worldwide evidence for malevolent goddesses – even, for example, among the arguably matrilineal Huron of Canada where women planted and harvested. A more interesting and relevant question which Dr. Meaden does not consider is the impact of the introduction of plough-agriculture on the role of women and the belief systems of agricultural communities.

Archaeology cannot rely only on functionalism and systematic analysis for its explanations; inspiration and gut-feeling inevitably play a part in our attempts to understand the past. And archaeological theories are not always falsifiable in a satisfactory Popperian manner. Major forward leaps in science can occur because some

bright lateral thinker spots an analogy between two previously unrelated subjects. As Richard Dawkins noted in *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) 'The successful scientist and the raving crank are separated by the quality of their inspirations. The former has the ability to reject foolish analogies'.

Dr. Meaden fails to tackle his analogy objectively. Why, in a Neolithic landscape dominated by forest rather than Wessex prairie farms, should an apparently minor natural phenomena such as crop circles dominate prehistoric belief systems and religious practices? I am afraid, for the time being, I remain unconvinced and I will consign this book to the shelf with all the other megalithomania written by single-issue fanatics anxious to popularise their obsessions.

And I will sympathise with Lord Byron (*Don Juan*, XI.25): 'The Druid's groves are gone – so much the better. Stonehenge is not – but what the devil is it?'

DAVID MILES

Alan Crossley (ed.), *The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Oxfordshire XII, Wootton Hundred (South) including Woodstock*. Oxford University Press for University of London Institute of Historical Research, 1990. Pp. xxiii, 528; numerous maps and plates. Price £60.

It has occasionally become fashionable to disparage the continuing achievement of the V.C.H. among those who cannot see beyond their own narrow interests, or who perhaps imagine that English history can be written without a solid basis of accurate and hard-won local information. Those who have constant recourse to it know better, and may enjoy recalling the not so distant time when the existence of Modern History as a discipline was warmly denied by the traditionalists of the university. But topography (or chorography) was a cultured discipline when much of history was still myth, and one has only to study the footnotes of Wood's *History of the University* (1674) to see the quality of the scholarship in that first golden age of local history. Counties with a decent multi-volume history may manage awhile without a V.C.H. but for those like Oxfordshire that have none each successive volume is awaited with eager anticipation, and the worn spines on library shelves attest to its continual use.

The general editor of the *History*, in a recent supplement to its own official history and bibliography (itself a vastly amusing work for aficionados of the genre), has declared that the character of the V.C.H. never changes for the sake of mere fashion or editorial whim. But the *History of Oxfordshire* has indeed changed over the years, from the magpie volume devoted to the University, via a whimsical path from the environs of the City to the south then north of the county, and now to the western regions where we have the second (and stoutest volume yet) on the history of Wootton Hundred. The preface contains a useful map of the present state of the *History* showing what has been done and what remains. Only heraldry, once the mainstay of local history, has waned, but manorial descents, nonconformity and charities rub along with economic history and the occasional sunburst of general narrative. The text (in length alone) is subtly adapted to consider changing interests, and can now be used as a reliable source on many fashionable topics, from local industries and population change, to field systems and architectural history. But happily this is all encompassed without losing the basic framework of manorial and parochial history that makes the *History* so indispensable. It may seem a little hard going at first for the inexperienced, but the difficulty of finding out about a place without this information is harder still. The history of minor

landholding is still difficult to follow (and indeed would be impossible without an accompanying atlas), but the format establishes the outlines, with sufficient references to follow up the topographical minutiae. The principal (and very obvious) caveat is that this is not a regional history, but therein lies the strength of the series. There can be no preselection of the 'typical', and no suppression of local vagaries, since every parish must be given equal treatment, in all its complexity and imbalance of source-material; those who wish to construct the regional pattern of any aspect may do so, and have no shortage of material to quarry. No regional history, however broad-based, could ever provide such a firm foundation of scholarship as is to be found in these pages.

The volume covers a compact area west of Oxford, between the Cherwell, Thames and Wychwood, comprising 15 parishes and several extra-parochial areas on the outskirts of the city. The towns of Eynsham and Woodstock are included, the latter (with Blenheim) taking up some 145 pages, the former only 60; villages range from Kidlington (with 12,626 inhabitants in 1981) down to the tiny Wilcote with less than a score on only 319 acres, and (incredibly for the V.C.H.) no recorded schools or charities. The area is one of considerable variety in village types, especially in the provision of greens, heaths and commons; only the prevalent riverside meadows give a unity of continuous land-use. The parish maps of the historic landscape remain one of the great strengths of the series, despite their less-than-attractive appearance. Although much of the land ended up in the extended Blenheim seignory, earlier landholding was diversified between monastic and lay landlords; one of the interesting aspects that develops with the progress of the *History* is the connexions with the city of Oxford, be it landowning by prominent Oxford citizens (p. 43), or information on supplies of firewood (pp. 139, 315). Ecclesiastical history is surprisingly rewarding, and the vituperative remarks reported on the battle between Tractarians and Evangelicals in the last century provide much dry humour throughout. The former monastic sites of Eynsham and Godstow abbeys are treated in full (as was done in the City volume), valuably supplementing the brief accounts in Volume II. Descriptions of churches are detailed, though sadly often lacking the plans that were once a standard feature of the series. The collection of ecclesiastical antiquities in Yarnton church is of especial note (pp. 486-7).

Miscellaneous points of interest abound alongside the commonplace of rural unrest and crime: the bizarre search for coal on Eynsham Heath (p. 99), paper roofing (pp. 111, 141); the capture of the duke of York's dwarf at Wolvercote in the civil war (p. 311), and the curious history of the unstinted common rights claimed on Wolvercote Common (p. 316), where an early airfield was established on the edge of Port Meadow (p. 311). Of exceptional importance is the lengthy history of Woodstock, including a valuable survey of properties and buildings in the town. The town's reputation as an early centre of glove-making is exploded, but in its place comes the making of polished steel jewellery in the 18th century (pp. 364-5). The deserved demise of the old corporation comes as no surprise when the poor freemen needed meal-tickets to attend elections in the 1870s (pp. 376-8). More scandalous and amusing is the story of the Marlborough interest in elections down to the abolition of the constituency in 1885: building funds were used to buy votes and the gardener was nominated as an honorary freeman (p. 403). In the absence of an extensive property interest in the borough, lavish expenditure was the norm at election time by treating with venison and ale, and other forms of local munificence, combined with threats to employment and banishment from the park. Unusually, in 1865, tenants were given the dispensation to vote as they wished (p. 406), while in 1826 the duke's three sons were involved in a violent street brawl at election time (p. 404). Lengthy treatment is also afforded to Woodstock Park and Blenheim Palace, where a careful re-examination of sources has modified previous published

accounts, and gives a detailed and accurate account of the buildings of the palace and its much-altered landscape, and the long history of its accessibility to tourists. Practical experiment would have established that the remarkable echo reported by Dr. Plot (Plate opp. p. 461) has survived the creation of the lake and lamentable demolition of the royal manor.

The great blind spot of the *History* remains its marketing. The price is indeed good value, and is kept low by new printing technology, but together with the appearance (perhaps even the title) of the volume may only serve to repel part of the audience for whom it is intended. Some earlier Oxfordshire volumes had attractive covers, with reproductions of topographical views; in the early days of the V.C.H. there was also extensive offprinting of individual sections. The County Council has had some success with reprinting the Modern Oxford and Banbury sections from previous volumes, and it is to be hoped (as part sponsors of this great enterprise) that the department will continue to do this, and at least consider offprinting Woodstock from the present volume, if not also some of the parish histories.

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