



# *The Archaeological Journal*

## Book Reviews



**THE IDEA OF ORDER: THE CIRCULAR ARCHETYPE IN PREHISTORIC EUROPE.** By Richard Bradley. Pp. xv and 242, Illus 74. Oxford University Press, 2012. Price: £60.00. ISBN 978 019960 809 6.

It is difficult to imagine our environment without rectangular houses, and yet the homogeneity of modern European housing can be demonstrated to be a process that was only completed in the last thousand years. For most of prehistory there has been a choice, with some people living in rectangular structures, and others living in circular or curvilinear structures. The differences between these two types of dwelling are significant and there are very few people in the West who would choose to live in a circular dwelling today.

This book by Richard Bradley is about the relationship between circular and rectangular architecture, primarily in the archaeological record for Europe. The book highlights the very distinctive patterns that are visible in this record, in particular the contrast between the prevalence of the circular in the domestic record for Mediterranean and Atlantic Europe, and the rectangular in the domestic architecture of central and northern Europe. This is a long lasting dichotomy that begins in the Neolithic, when there is a distinction between agricultural communities associated with cardial wares and those associated with Linearbandkeramik ceramics, but it is no less visible in the Iron Age, when the rectangular halls of the north European plain contrast so dramatically with the circular houses of Britain and north-west Iberia. The development and spread of Roman civilization marks the first serious disruption to this dichotomy in Europe, but even the Romans could not completely eradicate the importance of the circular house in Britain, and it took invasions by Anglo-Saxons and Vikings before circular houses finally disappeared.

This very broad summary disguises a lot of crucial detail which disrupts the simplistic dichotomy and provides some clues into how these different architectural forms were used. Bradley focuses a significant part of the book on these irregularities. For example, he considers the relationship between rectangular houses and round barrows that dominate the archaeological record for central Europe in the Bronze Age (Chapter 8); it would have been interesting to have his thoughts on the relationship between rectangular coaxial fields and circular houses in the Middle Bronze Age of southern England.

Of particular interest to this reader was the first section of the book which explored the concepts of round and rectangular in theoretical terms; first looking at functional then symbolic arguments, and then expanding the argument to look at the significance of curves and angularity in art (pp. 48–56). All three of these discussions produce

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interesting ideas which stimulate thoughts on how they could be applied to the archaeological record. The functional difference between round and rectangular architectures emphasizes the need to consider the limited ability of circular forms to respond to the changing size of a household. It also suggests that orientation would be a much more important consideration in the building of a rectangular house due to their susceptibility to damage in strong winds. Likewise, the cosmological understanding of houses emphasizes the significance of directionality in the use of rectangular architecture. This can be closely linked to patterns of colonization and movement along river valleys in a constrained landscape. In contrast, circular houses provide a worldview that places the inhabitants in the centre of a relatively open landscape, which particularly highlights the movement of time observed in the sky. The exploration of art suggests a dichotomy between feminine curves and masculine angularity that is difficult to corroborate in the archaeological record, but also the view that the circular is a transcendent symbol representing the sun and the moon that has a sacred significance throughout time.

It would have been interesting to see Bradley work through these ideas in the main text, but this is instead focused on evidence that complicates the overall pattern. I feel the book got a bit side-tracked by the detail and failed to present a complete account of the main pattern. This is a pity, as Bradley has dealt with these issues in many smaller papers, and it would have been useful to have these reconsidered and presented as a whole. Nevertheless, the book is a significant contribution and Bradley is one of the few people considering these big issues.

NIAL SHARPLES