BOOK REVIEWS

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Review of:
Holtorf, Cornelius J. 2000-2. *Monumental Past: The Life-histories of Megalithic Monuments in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Germany).* **Electronic monograph. University of Toronto at Scarborough: Centre for Instructional Technology Development. ISBN 0-7727-6305-4. Available as a CD-ROM (CAN $19.95) or online at URL: http://citdpress.utsc.utoronto.ca/holtorf**

Introduction

Reviewing *Monumental Past* is a challenge, and this is due mainly to three reasons. First, it encompasses so many topics – infinite indeed – that I am forced to write the review without the certainty of having read this work comprehensively. Second, it demands something rather different from a reviewer than a book: an electronic monograph review – an aspect deserving discussion on its own merit. Third, the format of the work, i.e. hypertext, is not merely a means but an end in itself – one of the monograph's arguments. Hence format and content are so intimately bonded that it proves almost impossible to separate one from the other in an attempt to organise this review. Let us, however, face this challenge, with a conviction that it shall yield significant results.

The Idea

The origins of Holtorf's project are explained in his e-monograph (0.5, 4.0). What started as an insight into the various contemporary meanings – or, to use Holtorf's wider term, "receptions" – of megaliths suggested that this variety would have probably existed in the past and thus deserved attention. This approach and its theoretical framework were developed through several papers (see his bibliography, 13.0) and eventually led to a PhD thesis that dealt with the meanings of monuments in later prehistoric Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Germany (Holtorf 1998); the basis of the present publication.

In the meantime, Holtorf developed the idea that the meanings of things are not inherent but created by their connections. His assumption is that "in later prehistoric periods, people in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern interpreted megaliths by connecting them with other ancient monuments and finds, with themselves and their ancestors, with particular interests, concepts and ideas, and with their cultural memory and history culture, as well as with wider worldviews." (0.3) Accordingly, he himself expected to (re)create those meanings by making connections and also to enable any virtual reader to (re)create those or other meanings by making new connections. And, for that purpose, what better than a hypertext format with innumerable hyperlinks allowing for unlimited connections – and thus, unlimited receptions?

Format and content are hence inevitably linked and are both equally important. So are past and present. For both pairs, it is the former which allows the construction of the latter. To make it more complicated, "the *object* of study in this work is, therefore, also the studying *subjec*t, and the results of my study describe its approach too" (0.5). While bearing this in mind, I will try to separate content from format in order to put my comments in order.

The Content: The Life-Histories of Megalithic Monuments
One of the foundations of Holtorf's work is the concept of "prospective memory" (6.6). In short, megalithic monuments were erected in the past but with a view to the future. They were intended to last, and indeed most of them have lasted for many centuries. Subsequently, they have experienced different uses and interpretations, different "receptions" (2.4). In each historical context, the "cultural memory" (2.0) or understanding of the distant past is constructed by changing conceptual connections. This is reflected in the "history culture" (2.1), the variety of ways – besides the academic – in which the past is dealt with. By researching the cultural memory and the history culture related to megaliths, Holtorf is reconstructing and, at the same time, participating in the life-histories of the monuments.

The idea that the meanings of the material culture are contextually determined is not new. However, Holtorf, far from just mentioning this as a cautionary tale, thoroughly explores the content and implications of such an idea. The result is effectively overwhelming. In the realm of megaliths, it was Glyn Daniel (1972) who first addressed the historical lives of the monuments. Only recently has this research approach started to be defined and further developed in different directions, and its theoretical implications expanded (e.g. Bender 1993; Bradley 1984, 1993, 1996, 2000; some papers in Bradley and Williams 1998; Caamaño Gesto and Criado Boado 1991-2; Chippindale 1994; Hingley 1996; Martinón-Torres and Rodríguez Casal 2000; Martinón-Torres 2001a, 2001b, in press; Patton 1996). In any case, it is Holtorf who has provided an exemplary case study and definitely explored the broad repercussions of this research field.

One by one, Holtorf goes through each and every one of the 1193 megaliths catalogued in the German district of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and, as far as his sources allow, explores the monuments' historical vicissitudes from late prehistory to the present day, including looting, protection, later finds, investigation, excavation, destruction, re-use of stones for other purposes, celebration of rituals, desecration, mention in tales and so forth. Furthermore, we find these monuments not only passively experienced but also actively playing roles: the megaliths themselves do represent a variety a concepts related to nostalgia, identity, progress, legitimation, aura, preservation, desecration, physical uses, entertainment, *Denk-mal*, study, and cosmology. Everything depends on the specific facts, ideas, interests or worldviews they are linked to. The picture is thus as rich as the reader likes, because the author gives us the freedom to simply click with our computer mouse to choose those associations by ourselves and, hence, create new meanings. The experience is fascinating. Besides, when giving equal consideration to all possible meanings and uses of megaliths, Holtorf is emphasising the relative quality of all the approaches that we tend to consider 'correct', as opposed to some 'alternative', less academic views. In

this sense, the electronic monograph defends a more democratic approach to archaeological heritage.

Within this exhaustive cobweb of uses and meanings, there are only two research lines which I would have valued but Holtorf does not cover. Since both of them have proven useful in the study of life-histories of megaliths elsewhere, it could be worthwhile exploring their application with other case studies. On the one hand, this e-monograph does not expand on the diachronic evolution of those megaliths' roles. Certainly, the value of a monument is different in each context, despite apparent similarities. In addition, any given present-day is obviously complex. Hence, each historical reception of megaliths is at the same time manifold and exclusive. However, at the same time, each historical moment is embraced by a wider socio-cultural context which may have conditioned the mainstream understanding or reception of the monuments. On this basis, we may choose a variable – e.g. the role of megaliths as boundary markers, the use of megaliths as artists' inspiration, the exploitation of the monuments as tourism resources – and try to reconstruct how this function originated and how it has evolved throughout the monuments' history (cf. Martinón-Torres 2001a, 2001b, in press; Martinón-Torres and Rodríguez Casal 2000). Megaliths' life-histories, like anyone's lives, have a diachronic dimension, which in my view deserves consideration. In this sense, I believe that Holtorf's work could be enhanced if some complementary sections such as "Monument values" (6.9), "Meanings of the past and ancient monuments" (5.0) or "Receptions of megaliths" (5.1, 5.2, 5.3) could materialise in a more sequential and interpretative fashion.

On the other hand, one resource whose potential is admittedly not pursued is the body of historical written sources referring to megaliths. In historical documents, even if indirectly, we find valuable insights into the life-histories of the monuments. For example, we may encounter numerous references to megaliths used as landmarks in historical times (Martinón-Torres 2001a), or to treasure hunters who excavated the monuments in search of gold (e.g. de Blas and López Álvarez 2001; Martinón-Torres 2001b: 80-120, 2002). Even though the e-monograph occasionally draws from written documents (e.g. 1.3.4, 5.2.8) the study of these rich sources is probably not as complete as it could be.

Regardless of my particular suggestions, the coverage of *Monumental Past* is impressively huge. Besides the topics above, and apart from the many hyperlinks to sources and websites, Holtorf directly explores or outlines such diverse and interesting subjects as the folklore of megaliths, heritage management, history of antiquarianism, the theory of ruin-value, the use of analogy in archaeology, the conception of the past in Ancient Greece, hermeneutics in archaeology, archaeoastronomy… the list is virtually endless. Anyone with the slightest interest in monuments or hypermedia theory will be highly satisfied with this suitably *monumental* piece of work.

The Format: Interpreting Ancient Monuments Using Hypermedia
Holtorf has produced the first PhD thesis in archaeology submitted in its entirety in a hypertext format. This step forward entailed a revolution in academia, and has undeniably provoked a highly suggestive debate as to the appropriateness of this medium (cf. Aldenderfer 1999; Costopoulos 1999; Holtorf 2000a; Intarch-interest 1999;

Karlsson 1999; and feedback in 11.0), together with some more superficial and poorly argued comments (Fagan 2001). In fact, Holtorf himself has needed to devote many kilobytes to justify both himself and the potential of hypermedia theory (Holtorf 1999, 2000a, 2002a, and 3.9 with subsequent links; Intarch-interest 1999). I will not take part here in the wider discussion regarding issues such as the convenient accessibility, cost or longevity of this medium, which in turn deprives the reader of the pleasure of sensory contact with a book (while lying in bed, for instance). However, I would like to make some specific comments.

There are several ways of starting to read *Monumental Past*, and none of them is a table of contents. The reader may choose amongst options such as a glossary, an overview, the bibliography, the implications of the study, a map or a database. From any starting point, the readers themselves have to make their own choices, clicking on the diverse links offered in each page, each of which leads to new pages with more links leading to other pages in and outside the website, and so forth. Soon you find yourself immersed in an infinite network of non-linearity, making your own connections and, consequently, interpreting the monuments in your own way.

This non-linear or non-sequential nature is the most controversial aspect of this e-monograph. Holtorf's experiment is a sharp expression of postprocessualism and radical constructivism. As noted above, the meanings are not inherent to realities but constructed by their inter-connections. Accordingly, the author tries to stand aside from the text. He simply presents the facts and encourages the reader to make links and construct meanings. This strategy is well argued, acceptable and useful. Moreover, it seems that our brains work by association rather than following 'logic' linear sequences (3.9, 3.8), hence the format of *Monumental Past* apparently not only enables us to construct our own knowledge but also helps us remember what we read.

Here I find, however, an intricate question. In my opinion, the 'disappearance' of the author is utopic. No matter how hard any writer tries, they will always be there, behind their work. Holtorf accepts this when he refers to "my work" and details many personal experiences and views, whereas at other times he hides his hand and does not tell the reader his interpretation, the connections he made or in which sections he has performed the latest updates (the e-monograph is under permanent construction!), and more importantly, the author does not clearly explain what his thesis is.

Fortunately, with the wealth of our discipline, we are moving forward to a more flexible academic world, where new ways of producing and disseminating knowledge are increasingly accepted and used. Nevertheless, I believe that an academic piece of work requires some form of thesis statement. The hermeneutic experience enabled by hypermedia is perfect for a conventional encyclopaedia, because in an encyclopaedia there is no point to be proven – just information to be provided. The case is different in *Monumental Past,* because here there are some inherent theses somehow argued. However, it is difficult for me to assess to what extent I agree with the author or how well he achieves his aims because I am not sure what those aims are.

The work explicitly "revolves around" three topics (0.3), but does not clearly explain what this 'revolving' is aimed at. This is not seen as a mistake but as a stem of Holtorf's meticulously designed strategy, and in this sense I applaud his consistency. His vantage point, stated from the outset is: "I do not think that I have to prove either my hypotheses or my skills, in order to make 'valid' statements about the past. It is obvious that after studying the same evidence, different conclusions could have been reached equally well... I have never felt the wish to preclude alternative interpretations..." (3.1). While this view is acceptable, I must say that I would not feel that my freedom of choice and interpretation as a reader were infringed if the author were to say "Here I am, this is my aim, these are my data, this is my interpretation". This would not preclude him from a non-linear presentation of the research. Instead, it would facilitate the job of those willing to share and discuss interpretations.

Implications

I do expect *Monumental Past* to become a milestone in the way professionals deal with the archaeological past. Holtorf has demonstrated that the focus on a megalith not only allows the study of prehistoric societies but also constitutes a basis to study the development of different societies up to the present day. His approach is indeed productive and could be applied in other fields of archaeological research. Furthermore, archaeologists should start to consider the whole life-histories of monuments during actual archaeological excavations, as Holtorf (2000b, 2002b) himself does. In addition, this e-monograph explores the wide potential of hypermedia not only for disseminating information but also for undertaking research proper.

Finally, and also very importantly, this work challenges the job of those professionals currently in charge of the management of archaeological heritage, and I encourage the author to develop this point further. In the present day, archaeologists normally have privileged access to monuments, and their approach is protected by law. Reading *Monumental Past*, one becomes aware that archaeological remains are subjected to different receptions from assorted standpoints. In principle, all these views and uses of monuments are equally valid and respectable – all of them should therefore be considered. Monuments are much more than containers of archaeological information, and thus handling monuments is not only about excavating, reporting, restoring and signposting. After all, monuments do not exclusively belong to the professionals of archaeology, but to everyone.

Two years after this e-monograph was first released, and almost four since Holtorf submitted his PhD thesis, its format has been thoroughly discussed, and this dialogue has yielded very significant thoughts. Nonetheless, the debate should not overlook what I consider the core of this work, i.e. the life-histories of monuments. The content of *Monumental Past*, notwithstanding the format, has crucial implications for the practice and management of archaeology. This, in my view, is the main reason why all of us should be browsing through Holtorf's work and questioning our own ways of dealing with archaeology. As the pioneer that he is, Holtorf (1999) wonders: "is history going to be on my side?". I believe that it will, and certainly hope so.

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