11. Giant assumptions: locating chalk figures within prehistory

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> The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion… draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there will be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects or despises, or else by some distinction sets aside or rejects…
>
> Francis Bacon 1620

Armed with the knowledge that the Cerne Abbas Giant dates to the early medieval period, it is now worth looking back at the debates and discussion about the period of his creation, with the benefit of hindsight. An examination of the evidence presented to support the idea that the Giant was prehistoric or Romano-British, and why these arguments were wrong, has the potential to teach us how ideas emerge and dominate, sometimes to the detriment of our understanding of the past. It is well recognised that archaeological interpretations involve at least some element of subjective reasoning, and in the case of Cerne Abbas there was a scarcity of direct evidence. However, some giant assumptions have been made; we need to critically examine these so that we might better conduct archaeological research in the future.

Vaguely ancient

The anonymous letter accompanying the earliest known depiction of the Giant, published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1764, relates that the hill figure 'is supposed to be above a thousand years standing'. This conclusion was drawn due to a three-figure number, thought to be a pre-1000 date, which was visible, cut into the turf between the figure's legs. The letter goes on to say that 'some think it was cut by the Ancient Britons, and that they worshipped it; others believe it to be the work of the Papists, as here was formerly an abbey etc.' (Anon 1764, 336). This early account sets the tone for discourse about the Giant over the next 230 years; where a prehistoric origin is invoked, albeit with little direct supporting evidence.

The extremely ancient age of the Giant in local understanding is evident in William Holloway's 1808 poem 'Giant of Trendle Hill: A Legendary Tale', a creative origin myth for the figure. The poem tells the story of how a giant, who has long troubled the country by killing sheep, falls asleep on the side of the hill. To prevent the loss of more livestock, the local people come out and murder him, after which they cut the outline to mark where he lay. The poem firmly places the Giant not only in the pre-Christian era, but also in the distant pre-metal age, as the villagers attack with only wooden spears and darts.

Dominant voices

The first archaeological account of the Giant was written by Sir Flinders Petrie, the highly distinguished professor and meticulous surveyor, who published his account of the hill figure in 1926, at the height of his career. His account provided evidence that supported these local assumptions that the Giant was ancient. The field survey itself had taken place in 1919, when

Petrie had taken 220 detailed measurements of the Giant with the help of his wife and son (Drower 1995, 340). His conclusion that the Giant must be 'at least as old as the beginning of the Bronze Age' (Petrie 1926, 11) was based on a number of factors. The first was the association with the earthwork enclosure, The Trendle, on the hillside above, which according to one dubious memory quoted by Colley Marsh (1901, 106) was the traditional site of the village maypole. This maypole Petrie links to 'primitive pole workshop' being maintained at the enclosure, connected with the Giant. Another was the presence of a spring to the south, which he suggested to be sacred. A third reason was the presence of earthworks on the ridge above the Giant, a tumulus and a curving bank cutting off the ridge. And finally, on the western side of the river valley, Flinders Petrie noted several large banks and a roadway that he thought had been laid out with reference to the Giant, and as these were cut by deep pits, which he assumed were flint mines, that these banks and roadway dated within the period of flint mining, probably 'not after the early Bronze Age' (Petrie 1926, 10–11).

In the same short book, Petrie set out evidence that the Uffington White Horse, Long Man of Wilmington and two crosses in Buckinghamshire were also examples of prehistoric chalk figures. With this article, the date of the Giant was firmly established as broadly prehistoric in both archaeological circles (eg, in the opinion of Ancient Monuments Inspector Charles Peers; Wilcox 1988, 524) and in popular understanding (eg, Anon 1937). Three years later, O.G.S. Crawford, the much-respected Ordnance Survey archaeologist, dismissed Petrie's explanation relating to the banks and roadway, but agreed with him that the figure was prehistoric, highlighting the nearby scatter of long and round barrows. In particular, he thought the key was The Trendle, which he thought most likely early Iron Age and therefore also the Giant (Crawford 1929).

Stuart Piggott was the next 'great man' of archaeology to publish his opinion on the hill figure. His first article (Piggott 1932) traces the possible name of the giant, 'Helith', via medieval legends of a 'wild Huntsman' to the figure of Hercules, thereby implying although not explicitly stating, a medieval date for the Giant. In a second cogitation on the subject, Piggott suggested that the Giant's 'crude naturalism' might suggest a 'Late Celtic' style, placing him into the Romano-British period, and more specifically to the years immediately following AD 191 (Piggott 1938, 327) although why this particular date was chosen is unclear. Following Crawford, he suggested that The Trendle might be a late Bronze Age or early Iron Age enclosure, perhaps a primitive temple, and suggested that its local name, the Frying Pan, was derived from Beelzebub in local mummer's plays, a character who holds a club and a frying pan. He linked this figure to 'a true folk memory' of the Helith-Helis-Hercules character of the Giant that had been recorded locally. Piggott concluded that the Giant as 'the most amazing survival of primitive religion in Western Europe' (Wilcox 1988, 526). As Hutton (1999b, 115) has highlighted, both Petrie and Piggott are adherents to the romantic view that traditions of rural England might preserve millennia-old pre-Christian beliefs and rites.

After years of silence on the matter, Rodney Castleden's 1996 book on the Cerne Giant brought together much of the archaeological and historical evidence, together with results

from new geophysical surveys which showed that the Giant had once held a cloak and possibly also a severed head, to firmly conclude that the hill figure was a depiction of an Iron Age warrior. In this conclusion, there is no doubt that Castleden was influenced by the earlier eminent archaeologists who had come to roughly the same conclusion. The book provided much of the basis for evidence presented in the 1996 trial to argue for a prehistoric or Romano-British date. Castleden's investigations of the iconography, which in the hands of others might have been clinchers for the identification of the figure as Hercules, are instead used as evidence for the Giant being a depiction of a broader pan-European Iron Age warrior god, drawing parallels with belted and aroused Celtic figurines and statues from Slovenia, Germany and France (Castleden 1999, 46–48). One might be cynical and suggest that within the broad remit of several thousand years of the prehistoric and Romano-British period and the entirety of Europe, it is no surprise that parallels might be found to the iconography and style of the Giant.

The key proponent of the 1996 trial, arguing that the hill figure was of prehistoric or Romano-British date, was not Castleden however, but Timothy Darvill (Darvill *et al.* 1999). Another eminent archaeologist, who had already penned books for the general public on prehistoric Britain, his evidence now forms an interesting case study in the art of corralling together evidence to fit an interpretation. As well as Castleden, Darvill invited a number of other key witnesses to support his cause: Chartrand set out how the Giant was positioned with careful knowledge of local topography to dominate the Cerne valley and was surrounded by prehistoric archaeology; Newman demonstrated that the violence, nakedness and sexual arousal depicted were clearly pre-Christian; Putnam was demonstrated that the area was densely occupied in this Iron Age period, and Miles showcased dating evidence from Uffington White Horse which demonstrated that hill figures could indeed be prehistoric. Darvill went further and cited the carved stone heads and supposed 'Celtic head cult' of the Iron Age (Ross 1967), an idea about which serious questions had been asked within five years of publication (Billingsley 2016, 80). Darvill concluded that the Giant dates to between 1000 BC and 250 AD, probably to before the Roman period (Darvill 1999, 29).

Four 'great men' of archaeology, Petrie, Crawford, Piggott and Darvill, each highly respected, articulate, and confident speakers and writers, have dominated the archaeological debate over the age of the Cerne Abbas Giant. Castleden, as both a historian and archaeologist, has a slightly lower profile and presents a slightly different case, as his book in considerable depth examines (and dismisses) alternative dates for the Giant and collates a wealth of historical evidence, as well as archaeological (Castleden 1996). Despite the seemingly objective investigations of these authors, there is of course no direct evidence at all that the Giant is prehistoric or Romano-British. Part of their willingness to ascribe an early date to the figure appears to be a preference for imagining a remarkable survival of beliefs and practices over millennia, rather than considering a more prosaic historical date. The prevailing view of other eminent archaeologists must have also swayed their thinking. There are also a number of underlying assumptions that may well have influenced, albeit subconsciously, the convictions of these archaeologists that the Giant dated to the distant past.

Underlying influences

Megalithic remains and earthworks, as well as natural rock formations and hills, were ascribed to the work of giants in medieval and early modern times (Fox 2000, 238–242). The Old English poem *The Ruin*, written in the 8th or 9th century, refers to the ruins of a Roman bathhouse as constructed by giants. There are numerous examples of generic attribution: for example, the Giant's Ring applied to the standing stones of Stonehenge, Wiltshire and the earthwork henge at Ballynahatty, Co. Antrim, or Barclodiad y Gawres ('the apronful of the giantess') on Anglesey. There are also specific named giants, such as Wade's Causeway, a Roman road in Yorkshire, or Hautville's Quoit, a standing stone in Somerset. The legends of Goram and Vincent explain the hillforts and gorges of Bristol, where there may have been another carved figure of a giant (Clark 2016). Could this underlying link between mythical giants and prehistoric monuments have unconsciously influenced the easy placement of the Cerne Abbas figure into prehistory?

The naïve style of the Giant, his slightly surprised face, as well as his naked and erect state, may have led archaeologists to recall Christian beliefs about the original state of humans prior to the fall of Eden, as well as general fertility rites and rituals, firmly located in the vague but pre-Christian distant past. Perhaps carved chalk phalli of the Neolithic period, or phallic emblems found on a wide range of Roman objects, made it seem more likely that the figure might date from one of these periods, rather than the Christian medieval world. The Giant was seen by archaeologists as strange, primitive and 'other', making his natural home prehistory. The medieval period, by contrast, appears to have been viewed as well understood, familiar and ordinary, no place for such an outlandish figure. It 'seems impossible that nude figures should have been cut in the medieval age' (Petrie 1926, 15); clearly Petrie was unfamiliar with the lewd marginalia of late medieval manuscripts (eg, Mattelaer 2010).

The fact that the Giant wields a gnarled wooden club is another feature that immediately raises an unconscious idea of prehistory, despite Darvill's contention that it is actually a finely carved weapon (Darvill 1999, 11). Entering 'prehistoric club' into an internet search engine will bring back a variety of blow-up plastic clubs, perfect for your prehistoric fancy dress party, many of them looking distinctly like the one brandished by the Cerne Abbas Giant. The club is commonly seen in cartoon and other depictions of prehistory, such as in *The Flintstones*. Actual evidence for such wooden clubs is of course, extremely rare. Even considering the fact that such organic objects rarely survive, there seems to be a real absence of evidence for such weapons in the archaeological record (Stoczkowski 2002, 79). Instead, this is an accessory borrowed from a mythological character from the Middle Ages – the Wild Man. This hairy, naked man, a popular figure at carnivals and pageants of the 14th and 15th centuries, lived outside of civilisation where he fought off wild animals with his wooden club. Ironically, given the immediate association in modern minds between prehistoric people and wooden clubs, it is possible that this character can be traced back to Greek mythology and to Hercules, who is constantly fighting wild animals, armed with a club, according to mythical narratives and iconography (Stoczkowski 2002, 79–82).

Finally, there is the well-known practice, albeit varied, complex, and not quite so common as generally supposed, of the Christianisation of certain pre-existing 'pagan' monuments. Monuments or enclosures that remained significant to local communities as places of burial, of centres of power or because of their association with symbolism or stories, were sometimes chosen as the location for early Christian foundations (Semple 2013). Much-cited examples include the church at Rudston in East Yorkshire built adjacent to a tall standing stone, and the church at Knowlton in Dorset constructed within a henge. It could easily be thought that the site of the important Benedictine monastery at Cerne Abbas, founded in 987 but with earlier monastic foundations in the village (Castleden 1996, 84), might have been a reaction to the presence of a significance pre-existing pagan monument or religious 'cult' site.

Persistence of an idea

The first part of this chapter set out how highly influential and respected 'great men' of archaeology have argued for the Giant to be of prehistoric or Romano-British date, each of whom collated together evidence to support their arguments. None of the individual strands of evidence are particularly convincing, but cumulatively, and perhaps supported by other unconscious assumptions outlined above, these views have been generally accepted without question. When archaeology is written with conviction and confidence about a monument with little hard evidence it is difficult to write compose counterarguments or to contend the prevailing view.

Even though most chalk hill figures have been shown to date from the 17th or 18th centuries, archaeological discoveries, such as the extent of prehistoric settlement activity in the Cerne Abbas landscape, or the dating of the Uffington White Horse, helped to maintain hopes through the late 20th century that the Giant would turn out, after all, to be prehistoric. A somewhat wishful assumption was maintained by archaeologists that the Giant was a miraculous ancient survival and dated to 'their' period of interest and expertise. Here we can see the effect of confirmation bias, 'the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations or a hypothesis in hand' (Nickerson 1998, 123). Despite being a widely evidenced and well-established psychological concept, we like to think of ourselves as primarily scientific and objective archaeologists, aware of our own biases. The Cerne Abbas Giant story shows that this is far from the case. Within confirmation bias are pertinent strands: primacy effect, that information acquired early in the process is likely to carry more weight than that acquired later; and belief persistence, that once a belief is formed, it can be resistant to change, even in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary (Nickerson 1998, 187). These biases can clearly be pervasive when the archaeological evidence is sparse. But archaeological opinions are not formed by people working alone; archaeologists are influenced by those who come before them and by those who dominate discourse. All of us work within our own distinct social and political context. Rather than perceiving these discourses in terms of paradigms (Kuhn 1962), it is perhaps more informative to view them as assemblages of actors: archaeologists, institutions, and publications, who form social and political networks (Lucas 2017, 267). Within these assemblages there are 'sticky' ideas that are retained in the face of contradictory evidence.

Such assemblages of scholarly discussion and ideas can be bounded and separated from other disciplines and ways of forming knowledge. Despite the Trendle maypole association being ruled out by Darton in 1935 (Darton 1935, 320–330), in 1954 the archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes would write about the Giant as a remarkable survival of pagan beliefs (Hawkes 1954, 143–144) and archaeologists continued to cite the erroneous 'fact' as late as the 1990s (Hutton 1999b, 116). A respect for other disciplines, and an acknowledgement that historians, particularly those who work in local history and folklore, have valuable contributions to make to archaeological debates, would do us well. On the one hand, archaeologists have been largely ignoring history, and on the other, forgetting that archaeology is at least partly a science, a discipline where hypotheses should be clearly set out and tested, and the evidence both for and against an argument fully explored.

Doing better archaeology

As long ago as 1938, V. Gordon Childe concluded that explanations tend to be shaped by the assumptions that archaeologists make, rather than the data they gather (Childe 1938). If we acknowledge that this is the case, how do we move forward to ensure that archaeology is not doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past? We need to be better archaeologists.

The link between archaeology and the law is pertinent here, as the Giant is one of the few archaeological sites ever to have been put on 'trial'. Roger Thomas, in an exploration of the similarities between archaeological reasoning and the practice of law, sets out the two ways in which both lawyers and archaeologists collect data and interpret evidence (Thomas 2014). The first is a problem-orientated approach, in which a particular hypothesis is pursued, giving a clear focus but perhaps leading you astray if the hypothesis is wrong, or resulting in confirmation bias. It is this method that the dominant voices set out in the earlier part of this chapter followed. The second is an inductive or empiricist approach, where evidence is collected in a more neutral way, which may mean not really knowing what evidence to collect and what to ignore (Thomas 2014, 257). Any good archaeologist will employ a mix of both strategies and conduct rigorous scrutiny of his or her own case before presenting it to others (Thomas 2014, 269), something that Castleden did in his book. It could be argued that the 'great men' failed to do this, in the case of the Cerne Abbas Giant. At the 1996 trial, presenting all the available evidence led to a partial shift of the views of the jury (the audience) away from a prehistoric or Roman date and towards a 17th century or later date (Barker & Darvill 1999, 162). We now know of course, that both arguments are wrong, but a more inductive approach clearly led some to question the prevailing view.

Why then, were those prominent, eminent and self-assured archaeologists of the 20th century, so wrong about the Cerne Abbas Giant? They did not act, in Thomas's words, as good archaeologists, but favoured a problem-oriented approach, being led astray by a wrong hypothesis and by their own confirmation biases, and the influence of those who came before. Unfortunately, those archaeologists who weigh up evidence from both sides of an argument, and present counterarguments that may undermine their own conclusions, do not sound as authoritative or confident, as those who present a clear single line of argument. It is these cautious and restrained voices, often under-represented within academic discourses, that we

need to amplify within archaeology. We need to value different, diverse and lower-profile approaches that are currently excluded from our assemblages of discourse, so that there are a variety of voices and opinions in the room (Pope 2011; Hamilton 2014). As a discipline we need question those in senior positions, to be humbler about what archaeology can achieve, to acknowledge the work of other closely aligned disciplines, to be more uncertain about our ideas and more scientific in our approaches.

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