

The ‘omphalos of Britain’: iconic sites and landscapes, methodological nationalism and conceptual conservatism in the writing of ‘British’ prehistory. A reply to Madgwick and collaborators 2021

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The first obligation of a critic is to give a fair, accurate and detailed account of the arguments he or she intends to attack (Evans, 2000, 294).

One icon of British heritage has a profoundly English cast. That is the landscape. Nowhere else is landscape freighted as legacy. Nowhere else does the very term suggest not just the scenery and genre de vie, but quintessential national virtues (Craig 1996, 137).

...core cultures...assume that the history of culture ought to be written around their development, around their periodisation (Craig 1996, 116).

Abstract

This paper in part responds to an article (Madgwick et al 2021) which in turn presented itself as a response to an earlier paper of ours (Barclay and Brophy 2020). But, like our earlier paper, this one has a wider remit. We had explored the presentation of the supposedly ‘national’ ‘unifying’ role of monuments in a geographically restricted sector of south-western England – what we called the “‘British” late Neolithic mythos’. Madgwick and his collaborators’ response fails to address the key points raised in our paper and, in doing so, in our view, provides further evidence of both methodological nationalism and conceptual conservatism in continuing to present a prehistory written around and prioritising evidence gathered in this restricted area. It does this apparently without any recognition that that research is being carried on within a problematic theoretical framework.

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Foreword

In November 2020 we were told by the editor of the *Archaeological Journal* that a response to a paper of ours published in the same journal (Barclay and Brophy 2020) had been submitted and we were asked if we wished to write a response, if appropriate. In April 2021 we were sent the proofs of the article which was to become Madgwick et al 2021, to allow us to consider whether we still wanted to reply, and to begin to write. We were surprised by the language used about us in the text and one of us (GJB) wanted to explore the possibility of taking legal action to prevent the article being published *in that form*. We decided against this, however, and continued to prepare our own response. In May 2021, the day after Madgwick et al (2021) was published, the Editorial Board of the Royal Archaeological Institute summarily withdrew its undertaking to allow us to publish our response. GJB's solicitors commissioned counsel's opinion and wrote three times to the RAI to ask that they honour their commitment. The RAI remained intransigent and a formal complaint was submitted to Taylor & Francis, who publish *Archaeological Journal* on their behalf, under their policies for redress. Disappointingly, no redress or mitigation was obtained.

After spending six months in fruitless discussion, we are now posting this version of our rebuttal as a free-standing publication.

Introduction

Archaeologists have long been aware of the socio-political context of their research, notably the long shadow nationalism cast in the 20th century, and of the problems that ensue from tying the prehistoric past to present-day politics. We became aware, in

2019, of the extent to which an important, well-funded and influential strand of research on some of England's most iconic monuments, set in one of England's archetypal landscapes, was being carried out apparently without any consideration of this wider framework.

In 2020 we published a paper titled “‘A veritable chauvinism of prehistory’: Nationalist Prehistories and the “British’ Late Neolithic Mythos””, the main thrusts of which were to examine:

the interpretation and public presentation of a particular view of the supposedly ‘national’ role of monuments in a geographically restricted part of southern England – what we have termed the British late Neolithic mythos: that monuments in the Stonehenge area had a ‘national’, ‘unifying’ role for ‘Britain’ at a time when ‘Britain’ had a ‘unified culture’ and was isolated from continental Europe, and that as part of that process, animals for feasting were transported from as far as ‘Scotland’. (Barclay and Brophy 2020, 1)

We also explored the ‘extent to which *a priori* assumptions can shape the interpretation of complex datasets’ (Barclay and Brophy 2020, 1). We based this on the analysis of a wide range of publications, institutional press releases, direct quotes from researchers, TV programmes and other media produced over a period of over fifteen years with the involvement of some of the authors who have now provided their response to our paper (Madgwick et al 2021, henceforth the ‘Response’).

The Response in Relation to our Arguments

In light of its contents and tone, we have decided to reply to the Response. Not an easy task, as it is in essence a paper about the use and abuse of isotope analysis, which refers to some selected aspects of our article while omitting any rebuttal of its main arguments. The Response takes 54% of its length (c. 400 out of c. 735 lines of text) to provide a detailed analysis of our handling of isotope data, which formed 8% of our text (c.77 of c. 932). The Response has a ‘fundamental disagreement’ with our description of Late Neolithic Britain, but does not try to answer the central concerns raised by our paper concerning the creation of narratives of prehistoric ‘Britain’, based on evidence from a restricted part of south-west England.

The Response also takes the extraordinary step of quoting the views of its referees to reinforce how ‘muddled’ and agenda-driven we are. We consider that peer-reviewers would not normally expect their words to be selectively and anonymously deployed in support of any paper they reviewed; we have not quoted the very positive comments made by the referees of our papers. The response in email and on social media to our paper has, however, been overwhelmingly supportive, and thus we believe that we have clearly spoken for many colleagues across England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland who have spent years engaging with the structural imbalances of archaeological endeavour in England and the rest of these islands in favour of professed ‘luminous centres’ and the way in which the problem has been largely ignored by many of those funding, working in and writing from the Wessex echo-chamber. The Response continues that problematic tradition.

The authors of the Response claim the following, in no particular order, in relation to our wider critique of the mythos, that:

- our article (Barclay and Brophy 2020) was solely or mainly a response to a single earlier paper, Madgwick et al 2019;
- our analysis of ‘interpretative inflation’ (Response p 362) was based solely on Madgwick et al 2019 and that ‘interpretative inflation’ was ‘entirely of [our] own making’ (p 368);
- there was ‘systematic bias’ in [Barclay & Brophy’s] approach, ‘demonstrating serious errors in the representation of [Madgwick et al’s] findings and fundamental misunderstandings of other research’ (p 362);
- the problematic focus on Stonehenge and Wessex in the creation of narratives of prehistory is no more than ‘the profession’s problems with Stonehenge’s high public profile’ (p 362);
- we were wrong to refuse to accept that Stonehenge is a ‘gateway site’ for the public (p 377);
- we were wrong to use a selective approach concentrating solely on the results provided by Strontium isotope analysis, rather than a multi-isotope approach;
- we had a ‘preferred narrative’ ‘describing Neolithic Scotland as somehow disconnected from the rest of Britain’ and that we had a ‘distaste for any hypothesis proposing the existence of a shared culture in Late Neolithic Britain’ (p 367, 374);
- the issues we raised in relation to neo-colonial geography were based solely upon ‘a garbled version of the isotope evidence’ (p 377)
- we ‘misrepresent’ evidence and arguments; we are untruthful; we have an ‘agenda’; we are ‘confused’; we are

‘muddled’; our work is ‘incoherent’; our handling of evidence is ‘unethical’; we are ‘desperately wrong’;

- we made ‘unfounded and ill-judged accusations of political bias’ (p 379);
- the authors of Madgwick and collaborators in their public promotion of their results did not use inappropriate modern political analogies – for example, a shared ‘British identity’ and a ‘Neolithic Brexit’ (p 376, 377, 378);
- the authors of the Response and of the mythos generally were not responsible for the terms in which matters were presented in different media and that researchers could not be held responsible for research being ‘garbled, slanted and misquoted’ (p 376);
- we did not provide evidence for pigs being imported from continental Europe or for other cross-channel contacts;
- we did not set out our own detailed scenario for the Late Neolithic in these islands.

Rhetoric, Misrepresentation and Focus

The language used in the Response about us and our work is problematic and specific accusations are serious and, we are advised, even defamatory. The words ‘bias’ and its opposite ‘unbiased’ (used in the sense that we are not) are applied to our work several times in the Response (p 362, 379); furthermore, an accusation of ‘systematic bias’ is advanced (p 362). The proposition that our writing is to further an ‘agenda’ also appears more than once. Throughout, our competence, honesty, motives and ethical standards are questioned, the effect being to seek to undermine our credibility and professional reputations.

We stand accused of suggesting that the authors of Madgwick et al (2019) and the other publications that we critiqued had their own “unacknowledged nationalist and neocolonialist” *agenda*’ (Response, 362, our emphasis): the Response, however, substitutes ‘agenda’ for what we actually wrote – ‘thinking’ – which means something very different. We are also charged with making ‘unfounded and ill-judged accusations of political bias’ (Response, 378). We did not. In reality, we stressed throughout that we made no suggestion that any conscious political ‘agenda’ was being pursued. Our critique of neo-colonialist thinking (once again we did not use the word ‘agenda’) was not based on ‘a garbled version of the isotope evidence’ as is claimed (Response, 377) but on a detailed examination of the handling of geography and places in a wide range of archaeological publications and other media over a period of some fifteen years, which demonstrated our point more than adequately (Barclay and Brophy 2020, 2, 3, 6). One of the significant problems of the Response is the way in which, as in these examples (there are others that we have not dealt with here), our arguments are misrepresented or words are put in our mouths.

The accusation that we show ‘systematic bias in [our] approach’ to promote an ‘agenda’ indeed wholly fits our prediction (Barclay and Brophy 2020, 23) that we would be denounced for having our own nationalist bias. Although the authors do not specify the nature of our ‘agenda’ it becomes clear this is what they mean: we and our work are characterised as ‘confused’, ‘muddled’, ‘biased’, ‘desperately wrong’, untruthful and, by implication incompetent; we are then further charged as Scots pushing the idea of an independent

Scottish Neolithic separate from the rest of Britain, one presumes as a reflection of our own nationalist politics. It is of course a norm of nationalist discourse that any attack on one nationalism must inevitably be from an opposing nationalism – one of the toxic effects of nationalist discourse is to remove from discourse any option beyond the nation. We reject this sterile binary approach.

In their concluding paragraph, in which the focus again narrows to address only the isotopic evidence, the writers of the Response resort to the direct implication that our handling of evidence has been unethical. We unequivocally and completely reject this. As Evans put it (2000, 284), criticism of this kind which ‘takes refuge...in rhetorical overkill, cannot be taken seriously.’ But the accusation has been made, in a peer-reviewed journal.

The Response tries to narrow the focus of debate, to engage only on very restricted grounds of the authors’ own choosing, thereby failing to address our critique’s core issues. Crucially, the Response is written as though our criticism was focused exclusively on a single article by Madgwick and collaborators (2019). In reality, our 2020 essay was a wide-ranging review which directly addressed the erection of the current mythos about the Stonehenge landscape and its supposed centrality in the ‘British’ Neolithic, which has been promulgated over some fifteen years in different media. We also offered a consideration of the problematic but unacknowledged issues caused for the writing of ‘British’ prehistory by some academics’ continued uncritical attachment to a narrative written, and a vision developed, from the narrow perspective of evidence produced from a part of south-western England. It has since been pointed out to us how this unrelenting aggrandisement of the position

and significance of this small area may have affected the outcomes of funding applications and research assessment exercises.

In private correspondence to us and on social media the Response has been described in highly critical terms and widespread concern has been expressed that this ill-judged text progressed through peer-review and the editorial process, rather highlighting the concerns raised in Barclay and Brophy (2020, 15).

The ‘Scottish Neolithic’

We are chastised in the Response for not offering our own view of the structure, nature and interconnectedness of Late Neolithic society in these islands. This was not possible within the word limit of the journal. Despite our critique of the archaeological evidence underpinning claims of cultural cohesion across all of Britain (evidence which is open to interpretation), it is not incumbent upon us to offer a counter-narrative, nor did we attempt to do this in our original paper. Our concern has always been with intellectual rigour, not advocating a preferred narrative, despite the Response’s claims to the contrary.

A significant element of our paper explored the wider archaeological evidence advanced by the advocates of the ‘British’ late Neolithic Mythos. The Response can only argue against this part of our paper by misrepresenting our position in the two ways already noted: by asserting both our alleged ‘distaste for any hypothesis proposing the existence of a shared culture in Late Neolithic Britain’ (Response, 374) and our adherence to a ‘Neolithic Scotland as somehow disconnected from the rest of Britain (Response, 374, 377).

We have repeatedly argued, however, that no such thing as ‘Neolithic Scotland’ or a ‘Scottish Neolithic’ existed and that the boundaries of the modern political entities of Scotland and England have no relevance during prehistory (e.g. Barclay 2004, 151; 2009; Brophy 2018), and have indeed expressly posited that these modern boundaries have been detrimental to the study of the Neolithic (Brophy 2020). We believe that the grounds for appropriating the whole of the later Neolithic of Britain and Ireland to aggrandise research on the Stonehenge area are very weak; but the case for elements of shared ‘culture’ at a variety of scales within these islands is not invalidated.

Tellingly, the Response hardly acknowledges that our paper was not, in any case, exclusively focused on Scotland. Its main thrust was to examine critically what we regard as the continued dominance of Wessex-oriented narratives in the study of *British prehistory as a whole*, and its consequences. We specifically referenced cognate concerns raised by archaeologists engaged in research elsewhere in England and Wales (e.g. Harding 1991; Jones 2011), and even in Ireland (e.g. Cooney 2001).

The Response also chided us for not providing evidence for cross-Channel contacts, despite our having made clear that was not our intention, which was only to highlight the problems of a hypothesis that took isolation from Europe as a given. Colleagues have, however, pointed out the extent to which the mythos plays down the significance of long-distance movements along parts of the Atlantic façade and the development of Atlantic rock art in this period (Valdez-Tullett 2019).

Isotopes

Turning now to the matter of our interpretation of the Strontium results in isolation. The Response offers a welcome detailed clarification of the nature, complexity and limitations of isotope studies, which may in time contribute to the creation of regionally sensitive narratives. We accept that we made errors of interpretation in relation to this minor part of our paper, *but these do not significantly impact on our overall arguments about the “British” late Neolithic mythos, its fragile evidence base, its methodological weaknesses and the ‘interpretative inflation’ surrounding it.*

We are told that (Response, 365), ‘it is not acceptable [for Barclay & Brophy] to base interpretations on radiogenic strontium values in isolation’. But this is precisely what was done when the idea of a ‘Scottish’ origin for livestock was first developed: the strontium data were used in isolation to assert just this (e.g. Balter 2008, 1704; Parker Pearson 2015, 88, reiterated in a lecture in 2017, 19:23 minutes). We should not underestimate the effect that the adoption of such an attractive, newsworthy hypothesis might have on subsequent research and interpretation, once it had been adopted, playing as it does into pre-existing beliefs about the relationship between the presumed core and periphery. This, we would argue, reflects the ‘conceptual conservatism’ highlighted in our title: the disinclination to relinquish a preferred interpretation in the face of contradictory indications (Nissani 1994), or in this instance, to sustain and promote a preferred interpretation on slight foundations. This problem is equally illustrated in MacKie’s work on late Neolithic hierarchy and religion, mainly in Orkney and Wessex, in which Ruggles and

Barclay (2000; 2002) noted that strongly-held beliefs had been maintained over decades almost unchanged while different evidence was shuffled about underneath a rickety superstructure to underpin them, being abandoned or added to only as necessary to maintain the unchanging preferred narrative.

The Response reminds us that multi-isotope analysis suggests that an origin for pig MD129 in inland, eastern Scotland ‘cannot be excluded’ and that northern origins for four other pigs ‘must at least be considered’. These cautious interpretations are now presented as the currently preferred scientific underpinnings for the ambitious claims of ‘British identity’, ‘pan-British connectivity’, ‘pan-British feasts’, ‘the first united cultural events of our island’, people performing ‘societal roles that were “national” in nature’, and so on that were disseminated to the media by the promoters of the mythos and their institutions, and documented by us (Barclay and Brophy 2020).

The Response criticises us for concentrating on a ‘handful of [isotope] values’ but the entire animal bone dataset on which the mythos relies is, although of significant size in an archaeological context, a sample drawn from a very much larger underlying livestock population on a vast spatial scale and across centuries. The small size of the dataset relative to the size of the question being addressed certainly does not mean that interpretation cannot happen, but instead suggests that the confidence attached to interpretations and possible alternative explanations should be carefully considered as available data become more detailed and specific. The Response (Response, 371) reminds us that the ‘dataset has two pigs’ out of 131 samples in the strontium range over 0.716 which *might* come from Scotland. Two

instances drawn from the underlying population are neither sufficiently significant nor a strong enough foundation for the elaborate and far-reaching archaeological interpretative structure erected on them, even when the small number of cattle bones is added. Is this the ‘overwhelming’ evidence claimed by the Response (Response, 368)?

The maturity and reliability of any approach to the past can be measured by the extent to which its whole basis can be overturned or require radical revision because of one or two new discoveries. One of the points we put forward is that a very far-reaching re-interpretation of British prehistory – termed by us the mythos – is partly founded on the interpretation of isotope analysis, the geographical underpinnings of which are rewritten and improved every year, as indeed is evidenced in the Response (Response, 378). This is hardly surprising, given the effort involved in producing these datasets. For example, the interactive strontium resource (Evans et al 2018) is based on about 850 samples across the British landmass (234,402 sq km; that is, averaged out, approximately one sample every 275 sq km. Clustering of sampling points means that much of the country has an even more sparse distribution of sampling points (see Barclay and Brophy 2020, figure 2). Further revision is therefore to be expected as new data come to hand.

One of the lead authors has, in public presentations of the methodology, described the interpretation of isotope evidence as ‘still educated guesswork to some degree’ (Madgwick 2017, 52:56) and as ‘educated guesswork’ (2018, 38 minutes). Is ‘educated guesswork’ about a very small number of animal bones a sufficiently robust basis for the promotion of this all-encompassing, interpretation of the structure of society in the

late Neolithic in these islands? We would suggest not. Rather, it reflects a particular interpretation of the archaeological and scientific data to support a world view in which Wessex evidence is primordial that has dominated the writing of British prehistory for decades.

‘Methodological Nationalism’

Nationalist and neo-colonial prehistories need not be adopted consciously; they can be created unconsciously (as we believe to be the case with the mythos) by those who have not explored how their own society’s deeply embedded assumptions affect the writing of any account of the past. They can be found in the approach of those who undertake research within modern societies that assume they are the neutral ‘norm’ against which only others have ‘nationalism’ issues (Cooney 2001). Cairns Craig (1996, 103) has described the rare, or perhaps unique:

English experience...defined, over against the other nations, as *undeflected* by its nationality: it represents a history whose nationality is not in question, and to which national issues are therefore irrelevant. ‘The English Question’ is not, [as is] the ‘Irish Question’, part of the problem of British history.

One of us has summarised the extensive literature on this matter (Barclay 2000, 2001, 2004) although the authors of the Response and the many other papers we reviewed in writing our original contribution (Barclay and Brophy 2020) seem not to have engaged with these, to us crucial, theoretical underpinnings of their research. We see here the limitations of their conceptual apparatus, as described by Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002, 304) whose work on ‘methodological nationalism’

highlights the problems in ‘taking national discourses, agendas, loyalties and histories for granted, without problematizing them or making them the object of analysis in its own right’.

The Response notes that we mention Scotland 40 times, envisaging this as a problematic ‘over-emphasis’ (Response, 18). Rather, this reflects both our detailed knowledge of the areas we have worked in and studied for many decades, and that we recognised that we could not speak with similar authority about other places. Barclay in this context drew attention to another sort of writing about ‘Britain’ in which authors writing from an assumed ‘core’ considered, mistakenly, that they could write authoritatively and comprehensively about the rest of the British and Irish ‘periphery’ but ended up with ‘accounts of southern English prehistory with inconsistent and patchy mentions of divergences from norms’ (Barclay 2000, 281; 2004, 153). The wide geographical scope of the promotion of the mythos over the last fifteen years demonstrates, as set out in Barclay and Brophy (2020), that this school of prehistory continues to flourish.

Perhaps only archaeologists operating outside Wessex will recognise the irony that the authors of the Response believe that their research ‘redressed the imbalanced emphasis on Stonehenge by exploring several major henge complexes of Wessex’ (Response, 377). In fact, it merely re-emphasises the problematic centrality of Wessex in the interpretation of the prehistory of the rest of what is now England and the rest of these islands.

The promotion of the mythos is not the first time that authors of Wessex-focused prehistory have tried to foist their

interpretative model upon the prehistory of the rest of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland on the twin foundations of limited data but strong belief, only for the whole thing to be quietly abandoned once contradictory data appear (Brophy 2015). We have in the first decades of this century emerged from a situation in which there were no known Neolithic houses in Wessex. This misconception was eventually overturned by excavation, but not before Wessex-oriented prehistorians tried for a decade to establish the existence of a ‘mobile Neolithic’, one without houses, over much of the rest of mainland Britain and even Ireland, apparently on the assumption that the ‘periphery’ could not possibly have categories of evidence absent from the ‘core’ (e.g. Thomas 1991; Parker Pearson 1993; Barrett 1994; Edmonds 1995). Cooney’s challenge (1997) to this hypothesis had his objections labelled as ‘underlain...by a whiff of nationalism’ (Thomas 1998, 456); as we have noted, any challenge to the supposedly ‘neutral’ core must be seen as ‘political’, even though the construction of the core is itself a political act (Barclay 2001, 14).

This dominance of Wessex and south-centred prehistory, in the archaeological efforts expended there and the primacy assigned to the resultant evidence, is not new. For over 80 years, this perspective has provided a supposed ‘norm’ against which other areas are adjudged different or less worthy of study, as Childe noted in 1940:

...one must ask...how far the prominence of Sussex and Wessex in prehistory is due to Aubrey, Stukeley, Colt Hoare, Pitt-Rivers, the Cunningtons, the Curwens, Crawford, Hawkes, Stone and Piggott (Childe 1940, 4)

We have examined this issue in detail elsewhere (Barclay 2000, 2001, 2004; 2009;

Brophy 2018). But there is no consideration of these issues in the publications we surveyed which underscore the mythos, nor in the Response. Nor do we see any consideration of, or concern about, the impact of Stonehenge’s iconic role in aspects of English identity in influencing the interpretation of prehistory. Nor is any attention paid to the significance of the location of these sites in an archetypal English landscape to the wider interpretative context. There is also, equally problematically, no acknowledgement of the deployment of this research by the political far right. If any research ought to have its ‘national discourses, agendas, loyalties and histories’ problematized or made ‘the object of analysis in its own right’ it is this (Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002, 304).

It appears that the writers of the publications we have analysed for our first paper (Barclay and Brophy 2019) and the Response to that analysis do not recognise that the theoretical context of their work – in the sense of the framework of modern culture, identity politics, the biases potentially inherent in research on a monument and an area at the heart of English identity – is worthy of consideration. The Response suggests that the concerns, expressed over decades by archaeologists across Britain and Ireland, about the distorting effects of the centrality assigned to Wessex prehistory are to be dismissed as nothing more than the profession’s exasperation with ‘the media focus on Stonehenge’ or with ‘problems with Stonehenge’s high public profile’ (Response, 377)! And we are further told both to stop denying ‘the importance of Wessex in the Late Neolithic’ and to ‘embrace the fact that we have a “gateway” site through which the public will find out about prehistory’. But if that prehistory is as problematic as the

mythos, as political, as invasive of the interpretations of the prehistories of other places, even potentially as nationalistic, are we to acquiesce? Are we to accept without criticism the increasingly eccentric attempts to shoehorn Stonehenge and its satellites into the media as somehow aiding public interest in and understanding of prehistory (eg Chadwick 2021; Chao-Fong 2021)?

It is hardly surprising that the iconic status of Stonehenge and the chalklands continue to exert such influence over the research. One of the lead authors has revived the mystical idea of Stonehenge being the 'omphalos of Britain' (Parker Pearson 2012, 331; Tolstoy 2016, 55; 2018) which he suggests could be 'understood as a monument of unification, integrating the cosmological aspects of earth, sun and moon into a single entity which also united the ancestors of the people of Britain' (Parker Pearson 2012, 342). This sort of writing is in the problematic tradition of Jacquetta Hawkes's *A Land*. It does not seem surprising that the outcomes of the research we have been discussing have provided renewed archaeological underpinnings for this long-standing mystical expression of English identity, in the form of Stonehenge, its hinterland and the chalk landscape in which it lies.

Here is the heart of our island: the Chilterns, the North Downs, the South Downs, radiate hence. The fibres of England unite in Wiltshire, and did we condescend to worship here, here we should erect our national shrine...' (Forster, *The Longest Journey* (1907) quoted in Craig 1996, 130)

Such a vision is not a sound foundation from which to write a prehistory of these islands that reflects its variety and richness away from

the World Heritage honeypots. As Johnson has written (2006, 177),

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with such an emotive turn...However, when it is not accompanied by serious critical analysis, an emotional linking between landscape and nation can be politically suspect.

We have noted the ways in which this sort of mystical, nationalistic writing about the past has appealed to the political far right, from which the authors completely distance themselves in the Response (Response, 378). Hawkes's *A Land* (with its troubling prehistoric settlers of the 'Nordic race') was the subject of a gushing fan letter to her by Henry Williamson, the 'troubled' (for which read unrepentant Nazi) author of *Tarka the Otter* (Griffiths 1983, 372; Macfarlane 2012, xxii). It harks back to a strand of inter-war ruralist, anti-modern, *völkisch* writing. Once again, the proponents of the mythos seem either unaware of this tradition, its links to the iconic landscape and sites at which they are working, its continued appeal and the risks inherent in adopting it, or are simply unwilling to engage with it. As Jonathan Last (2019) has argued, the challenge for archaeologists and heritage authorities in England is 'to produce a (pre)history of the countryside that is not linked to nostalgic ideas of indigenous white Englishness' and we can see nothing in the Response or the papers we critiqued that either recognises or, still less, counters such ideas. 'Methodological nationalism' has been recognised as the dominant perspective of historiography and archaeology in states undergoing crisis, nation building or national renewal (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 305). Is it a coincidence that the mythos has emerged – promoting as it does an anachronistic 'shared British identity' in

prehistory – as the concept of ‘Britishness’ itself has come under strain in the first decades of this century? Unfortunately, the promoters of the mythos see no merit in exploring these issues.

The Media

The section of the Response on ‘Media Coverage’ is perhaps the most problematic. The Response offers the dispiriting view that ‘no matter how good one’s press release, one’s research will be garbled, slanted and misquoted’. One might ask, then why release information to the press? The media, however, did not always garble or misquote, as we demonstrated in our 2020 paper and again here. ‘Slanting’ did indeed happen, as should have been anticipated. The Response again attempts to narrow consideration of our critique insofar as it deals only with Madgwick et al (2019). We had, however, explored the way that the mythos had been actively promoted for more than a decade through a wide range of media and we showed conclusively that inflated and politically-charged lines of interpretation had been advanced by some of the researchers who have promoted the mythos (Barclay and Brophy (2020). We also outlined the academic context within which such lines of interpretation have been encouraged to emerge.

To see concerns raised that our ‘skewed narrative’ was being ‘uncritically recycled’ (Response, 378) in social media and in the academy raised a wry smile, in the face of the relentless media boosting of the mythos that has been going on for more than a decade, as

documented in our original paper. We were disheartened, if not surprised, to see in the Response the rejection of any responsibility for the media circuses that followed not only the publication of Madgwick et al (2019) but also previous publications promoting the mythos (documented in Barclay and Brophy 2020). Much of the ‘interpretative inflation’ over the fifteen-year long creation of the mythos arose from University press releases and from interviews, which included direct quotes attributed to lead authors. We listed some of these (Barclay and Brophy 2020, 5-6, 15-16).

We also note that the Response insists that the issue of Brexit was raised by journalists intent on promoting a pro-Brexit editorial line, not by researchers, during interviews (Response, 376, 377). In our 2020 paper we noted that a *Daily Telegraph* journalist directly contradicted this version of events in relation to quotes from a lead researcher: as she tweeted, ‘these are direct quotes. I have the shorthand note’ (Sarah Knapton @sarahknapton Twitter 16 March 2019). Similar quotations attributed to the same researcher appeared in a more sceptical article in *Ha’aretz* (an Israeli paper) and *The Times* (Barclay and Brophy, 2020, 5). It is a matter of public record that two authors of the Response themselves introduced the Brexit analogy before 2019. In a lecture on 19 May 2017 Madgwick (2017), stated (18:50 minutes), in relation to population origins and Stonehenge, ‘This was the very first Brexit’.¹ Furthermore, Parker Pearson lectured to the Society of Antiquaries of London in 2017 and described the isolation of Britain from Europe as ‘a Neolithic Brexit basically’ (48.01). In a

¹ We have included references to these public lectures, which have been published on the internet, as our research has explicitly gone beyond academic publication to examine the ways in which a wide range of media have been used to promote the mythos.

subsequent interview on the BBC website in February 2018 he was quoted saying ‘the people of Britain had cut themselves off from the continent – Neolithic Brexit’ (Rincon 2018). One of us has argued elsewhere about the manifest dangers of Brexit parallels in relation to the presentation of the ancient past (Brophy 2018, 2019).

We note that none of the press stories claimed in the Response to be founded on ‘garbled, slanted and misquoted’ material seem to have been the subject of complaint or challenge. A case in point is the deeply problematic *Daily Telegraph* headline of 14 March 2019: “‘Neolithic Brexit’ unearthed at Stonehenge shows British identity began 5,000 years ago, say archaeologists’. The ‘Neolithic Brexit’ and ‘British identity’ elements are both attributed to a lead researcher. Apart from a single claim on Twitter (subsequently rebutted by the *Telegraph* journalist, see above) of misquotation solely about the ‘Brexit’ quote, but not about a quoted ‘birth of a British identity’, the authors of the research seem, as far as we are aware, to have made no public complaint. We have found no letter asking for retraction published in any newspaper and no suggestion has been made that complaints were ignored; no comments were added below the newspaper article or on social media; no public statement or press release was put out by the affected universities disputing or offering clarification of the newspaper’s political spin on the project results. While we do not downplay the challenges of dealing with the press, at the very least, publicly raising concerns about the abuse of one’s own research in the media does not seem too much to ask (Bonacchi 2018, 1659).

Broad Brush Prehistory

The Response revisits some of the supposed archaeological underpinnings of the mythos. In our assessment we pointed to the problems inherent in the reliance on simple typology in relation to monuments and the meaning of material culture (notably Grooved Ware) that underlies the mythos. To take one example, the distribution of henges is presented as an important prop for the mythos (e.g. Parker Pearson 2012, 330). It is apparent that ‘henge’ as a coherent, useful monument class no longer exists (Barclay 2005; Brophy and Noble 2012). As Gibson has noted, ‘the problem with henges is that archaeologists no longer know what they mean by the term’ (2012, 1). Yet the Response continues to rely on ‘hengess’ as if such sites still represent a chronologically and structurally distinct and useful diagnostic class across Britain, which could be adopted *de novo* as part of a Britain-wide tradition, rather than often being an arrangement of bank and ditch around, and perhaps responding to, pre-existing features of different kinds (Barclay 2005). The approach used by the mythos-builders seems not to have moved on from the interpretative role of henges presented in the mid-20th century, for example in Jacquetta Hawkes’s (1951) *A Land*:

As far away as the Orkneys [sic], as Derbyshire, Norfolk and Devonshire, there were others, smaller and simpler than Avebury and Stonehenge, but with at least as great a similarity of plan as is found among Christian churches. Such uniformity suggests some degree of religious cohesion, possibly even a scattered priesthood, a primitive foreshadowing of the Druids. (Hawkes 1951, 154)

Interestingly, we find Hawkes's final sentence echoed in a quotation attributed to one of the authors of the Response in the *Independent* on 13 March 2019, that, 'It strongly suggests that key people were not merely functioning politically, ideologically or ceremonially at a local or regional level, but were also playing roles on a much broader country-wide canvas.' (Keys 2019)

The Response does not adequately address our point that one area identified as a likely source of livestock found in Wessex – North East Scotland – is notably deficient in 'henges' as traditionally defined (Barclay 2005). Nor does it engage satisfactorily with the fact that the overwhelming majority of excavated 'henges' in Scotland are in fact Chalcolithic or Bronze Age features, not late Neolithic (Younger 2015; 2016). In the Response 'henges' have to some extent been replaced in the argument by a generalised circularity of monuments and the suggestion now seems to be that there are circular monuments of earth, timber or stone in many parts of Britain over several centuries, so they must represent enough of a shared contemporary 'culture' to support the view that Stonehenge and its satellite sites were a focus of 'Britain'-wide activity.

The Response suggests that Orkney saw the pioneering establishment of 'classic' henges (ditch inside bank) although the island has only one debatably 'classic' henge (Stenness – Brodgar does not have a bank (Richards 2013)) and the radiocarbon dates might equally suggest central/eastern Scotland as an early springboard to their development (Barclay 2005). Harding and Burrow have both argued for the existence of 'formative henges' dating to late in the fourth millennium BC not only in Orkney and southern England, but also in Ireland and

Wales (Harding 2003; Burrow 2010). All this suggests, as might be expected, that the origins of this particular arrangement of bank and ditch cannot easily be pinned down to any single region. We have elsewhere discussed in detail the variant core-periphery issues inherent in the mythos, notably that anything – in this case 'henges' – that does not originate at one end of the Stonehenge–Orkney axis must originate at the other (Barclay 2000; 2001; 2004; 2005). The promoters of the late Neolithic mythos may disagree, but they have not engaged with these arguments.

The Response refers to similarities between house plans in Orkney and Wessex while noting how rare such architecture is elsewhere. It is thus not clear how this distribution underpins a 'shared culture', particularly since areas with neither such houses nor 'henges' are those from which far-travelled livestock were supposedly drawn. This perspective also raises afresh long-standing criticisms of the appropriation of Orkney as an interpretative annex to Wessex, with little regard paid to what lies between. This problem, which operates from both ends geographically speaking (Brophy 2017), is considered in detail elsewhere (Barclay 2001).

Another shared characteristic that the promoters of the mythos employ to underpin their view was the distribution of cremation burials, mainly in the form of simple unaccompanied cremation deposits in pits, which we argued hardly provides a very convincing series of defining characteristics – 'cremated bone in a pit' is not the clinching type-site the Response asserts it to be (pace Willis 2020). Simple cremation burials in pits, of course, continued as a practice into the Bronze Age but we do not know how this continuity is supposed to impact on the

mythos's idea of shared culture across 'Britain' in the late Neolithic.

Conclusion

...taking Britain as a whole the most important centres of any culture or civilization are likely to be in the south the island (Fox 1943, 38)

The Response (Madgwick et al 2021) avoids dealing with the main thrust of our critique: the 'elephant in the room' of English, British and even Irish archaeology. That is, the extent to which an almost mystical attachment to 'our most precious and sacred' landscape (Holland 2020) distorts the writing of prehistory across these islands. And the way in which complex and very far-reaching interpretations that happen to coincide with that world view are erected using, we would argue, unsatisfactory, certainly insufficient archaeological and scientific foundations. The Response does not address the neo-colonialist thinking that underpins that narrative and, oblivious, continues to provide examples of it (eg Response, 368, in relation to claims about 'the whole of Britain'), as well as of vaguely apprehended, broad-brush treatment of prehistories outside the 'core'. In fact, it seems the most likely legacy of this Response is to act as a warning to those who try to stand in the path of the 'Stonehenge juggernaut' – by mounting any challenge, however well-supported by evidence, against the 'intractability of old national narratives of the past' (Hanscam 2019, 1). In that respect, we hope that others will not be discouraged.

The Response claims that it is 'an absurdity' to link the people of Neolithic Britain to 'contemporary political debate', but we have demonstrated that this has in fact been done by at least some of its authors in the promotion of the mythos – the anachronistic idea of a prehistoric 'British identity' and 'Brexit', for example. Our positions and our arguments have been misrepresented or avoided; replies have been offered to caricatures of our points, rather than their substance; and words have been put in our mouths. In the process we have been accused of behaving dishonestly and unethically, our motivations and our professional standing and competence have been attacked in emotive and personal language we were astonished to find in a reputable academic journal. Indeed, counsel's opinion is that some of the Response's accusations are defamatory. Publication in a peer-reviewed journal, however, protects an author from any legal consequences.²

The writers of the Response make our points for us, that this strand of archaeological interpretation focused on Stonehenge, its hinterland, and the Wessex chalkland continues to operate in a theoretical vacuum, in which its wider historiographical, cultural and socio-political context are ignored or disregarded. It avoids any consideration of the impact of those places' iconic status, the consequent distorting effects on the writing of 'British' prehistory, and the enduring appropriation of this manner of writing by the far right in Britain in the 20th and 21st centuries. It continues to see Britain (and in some

² Defamation Act 2013, S6(1). It is worth pointing out that we asked the ten pre-publication readers of Barclay & Brophy 2020 to root out anything that might be read as having 'edge'; anything that might be read as personalising our critique; anything that queried the motivations of the those whose work we were surveying. One of our readers – a former Chief Executive of Historic Scotland – had no other role but to check the 'tone'. Our anonymous referees made further suggestions, which we implemented. We have taken the same approach with this paper. Other authors may take a different approach.

measure Ireland) beyond the study area (apart from Orkney of course) as an inadequately-defined, marginal ‘other’ from which to select things that however tenuously tie these ‘peripheries’ to their ‘core’.

Most importantly, the mythos demonstrates the damaging effects over many decades of methodological nationalism and conceptual conservatism, ignoring the effect that this world view has on the selection and interpretation of evidence and the construction of narratives: ‘pan-British centres’, round the ‘omphalos of Britain’, hosting ‘the first united cultural events of our island’ organised by people with ‘societal roles that were “national” in nature’, and promoting

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- an anachronistic ‘unified’ prehistoric ‘British identity’ in the context of a ‘Neolithic Brexit’ belong in the time of Fox’s *Personality of Britain* (1943) and Hawkes’s *A Land* (1951), not 2021.

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