

### BOOK REVIEWS

AUBREY BURL, *Rites of the Gods*. J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, London, 1981. 258pp., £12.00 (hard) ISBN 0-460-04313-7.

Reviewed by Richard Bradley

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In some ways *ARC* is the wrong place to review this book. *ARC* has been concerned with theory, discussion and debate: Aubrey Burl's new book is addressed to the general reader and must be judged according to its objectives.

As the title suggests, this is a book about prehistoric religion. Its scope is considerable, extending from the European palaeolithic to the British iron age, with numerous cross references to the historical period, to folk customs and to the ethnographic record, particularly that of North America. Burl is concerned to offer a credible and properly researched alternative to the widely disseminated views of

the members of the lunatic fringe. Whilst he is rightly dismissive of their achievements, let us hope that this book receives the same amount of attention. In order to do this, a paperback edition is required.

How far does Burl fulfil this objective? This book is remarkably well written and well illustrated. The prose style will not be to everyone's taste, but it is refreshing to find an archaeologist who can be read by the non-specialist. The plates are carefully chosen and are more than usually effective, although a few of them are a rather odd colour. Burl has put a great deal of research into this unpretentious book. His range of references is enormous and introduced me to British sources which were completely new and well worth exploring. Beneath the smooth surface of this book, there is hard work and a shrewd selection of materials.

This book was not written for the specialist, and I am reluctant to criticise it from that standpoint, since I believe that it will serve an important role in introducing the general reader to real archaeological data, rather than the mystical fantasies which fill the bookshops already. But even at this level I do feel that this approach has two drawbacks. Burl sees prehistoric religion as the one way in which the community could cope with an almost intolerable life style. He presents a terribly bleak vision of prehistoric life, embellishing his examples in a truly Gothic prose. But he does exaggerate. He believes in the starving hunter-gatherer and in the pathetic bronze age nomad. These may be creatures of the imagination just as much as Euan MacKie's theocratic master race. Also, Burl's presentation depends on well chosen and often

arresting snapshots of prehistoric life. There is little sense of time or change, indeed, it is not clear how far he believes that there was no change. His interpretations of this material are entirely intuitive. Although he uses ethnography for local colour, the approach is literary, not analytical. Much of the problem arises because Burl has no clear conception of the place of 'religion' in the social formation. I suspect that this goes outside the scope of his book.

Aubrey Burl has now written distinguished books for both the specialist and the general reader. He has an original approach, a very wide range of reference and a rare gift for effective prose. We still need a satisfactory textbook of British prehistory, one which is not too technical and not too boring. Surely, here is its author.

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SUSAN FRANK, *Glass and Archaeology*. Studies in Archaeological Science (ed. G. W. Dimbleby), Academic Press, London, 1982. 155 pp. £12.20 (hard) ISBN 0-12-26520-2.

Reviewed by Colin Shell

In this rather slim volume, Susan Frank sets out to provide a comprehensive guide to glass from a scientific point of view, from its origins in the fifth millennium BC, through its rapid increase in use with the invention of glassblowing, to the post-medieval period and onset of mass-production. In a limited way the book succeeds as a guide, but it cannot be greeted as a comprehensive handbook on glass for the archaeologist. It is more of a general introduction with a less than complete treatment of the subject.

Much of the description of glassmaking technology is drawn

from later historical sources and there is a strong bias towards later material. This is understandable in that a wealth of information survives for the later period, but it is exactly for the same reason that a full discussion of the earlier evidence would have been appreciated. The range of glass considered is narrow. While vitreous waste-products, such as metal smelting slags, may require little attention (although vitrified forts are discussed), and obsidian is only briefly mentioned, the importance over a long period of glass beads and enamelling is almost entirely overlooked. The geographical scope is also limited, with the only detailed discussion of excavation evidence restricted to post-Roman Britain. Islamic glass is hardly mentioned, and Far Eastern glass only in a caveat that barium-containing Chinese and Japanese glass may be confused with leaded glass in a simple density test.

The basic structure and properties of glass are explained in general terms without examples of exactly how properties change with composition. Composition and colour are discussed within a review of the development of glass technology. Here, one particularly felt a fuller treatment was needed, with more primary information. Although this was compensated for in part by the author's praiseworthy attempt to provide a good annotated bibliography, the reader was at times referred to this when the information itself should have been given in the text. In several chapters detailed description and primary references are omitted. Further information on the earliest evidence for glassblowing in the Near East in the first century BC requires a search for the original source in one of the cited review articles. Hence it is at least two steps away, even for those able to consult an appropriate library. Similarly, more illustration of