

The Storm of 877 AD. What can Art do? - John Bartholomew addresses issues of art and archaeology.

In 2015, I had the opportunity to create an art piece for an exhibition at Durlston Castle which overlooks Swanage Bay. I had recently read John Peddie's book *Alfred Warrior King*¹ and was aware that The Anglo Saxon Chronicle reported that, in the New Year 877 AD, 120 Danish longships of Guthram's fleet had been lost in a storm in Swanage Bay. With a conservative estimate of thirty men in each ship, this is a loss of 3,600 fighting men. There have been other storms that have affected English history but could this have been the most critical? Peddie writes 'Guthram's position, from being one where absolute victory was clearly within his reach, was now hopeless' (p 113) . Guthram continued his efforts to conquer Wessex but in 878AD he was defeated at the battle of Eddington

How do you respond to such an event with an art piece? As stated, the location at Durlston Castle is by Swanage Bay so to me it was a bit magical to be able to create a piece which evoked that event overlooking the bay where it had happened.

The Danes were great military strategists and had forces organised from three possible directions. Guthram was occupying Wareham with a fleet joining him that had sailed from the Wash; he also had bases up the Thames and had organised a force to come up the Parret River under Ubba. Alfred besieges Guthram in Wareham, they swap hostages and Guthram agrees to take his land army to Exeter. The fleet attempted to follow him but was wrecked in above mentioned storm in Swanage Bay. He subsequently goes to Chippenham which he occupies on 6th January 878AD and also 'occupies West Saxon Land'.

Alfred famously flees to Athelney pursued by Guthram's mounted infantry. This is the lowest point of Alfred's kingship but it is downhill from then on for Guthram. Firstly Ubba approaches from the West with twenty three ships and is defeated by ealdorman Odda and a Devonshire Fyrd. This makes Alfred less able to be got at or contained on the levels and by Easter, Alfred is joined by men of Somerset and carries out guerrilla warfare from Athelney. Seven weeks after Easter, Guthram is defeated at the Battle of Eddington and after hosting him for week Alfred has him convert to Christianity. Guthram agrees to depart.

So the probability is that the storm in 877AD changed history, Alfred regained Wessex and paved the way for his grandson Athelstan to become the first king of England in 927 AD. What can art do to respond to such events? This was my response:



In the last newsletter, Mary quotes Karen Willis's final question in her excellent talk , '*Can there be a place for art to offer an alternative way of visualising history....and does an artist's position differ from the historian within the research process?*' The answer to the first has to be yes but it most likely wouldn't be accepted as history if it transcends the evidence which it so easily can do. To the second it could be said again that artists and archaeologist/historians may as Renfrew ² argues have parallel visions and goals. Both are interested in such questions as, as he puts it: 'What are we', where do we come from'. This touches on the common motives of artists or archaeologists and the personal experiential effects - the evocative magic of some finds and museum pieces and the imaginative wonder archaeologists may feel in their work. Liz's definition of Archaeology as 'Past lives Touching Our Lives' in the last newsletter fits this narrative of generating imaginary worlds ³. Motive, imagination and personal experience only count in history or archaeology if they can further an acceptable interpretation of available evidence.

In a similar vein, Renfrew seems to believe that art can aid archaeological interpretation. He says 'the work of the brilliant contemporary sculptor Richard Long can lead to a reassessment of some of the great monuments from the early history of mankind ...to see them in a fresh light is therefore to reach a new understanding of those early societies..' (p8, 9 Renfrew). I am dubious about the idea that our feelings regarding the nature of past cultures, the way we indeed feel they may 'touch our lives' can have any evidential basis. Experimentalists can mimic the processes through which say fibre, ceramics or metals or alcohol were made but can you claim to have got into the symbolic culture in which these practices existed? I would say that this is not possible, although the desire to know say how they lived or how they thought and the temptation to make interpretations that transcend the evidence is powerful. Archaeologists' finds of past material culture have a higher iconic power than art pieces because they can give a feel of a real connection, but maybe art does expand the imagination, points up relevance and usefully draws our attention, but evidence is a harder thing.



John's art installation

With the Durlston installation, my aim was merely to record, to remember and commemorate an event and I was moved to be able to do so overlooking that event's location.

John Bartholomew

References

- 1) Peddie, John, *Alfred Warrior King* Sutton Publishing 1999
- 2) Renfrew, Colin, *What are we? Where do we come from? figuring it out. The parallel visions of Artists and Archaeologists.* Thames and Hudson 2003
- 3) Caldwell, Liz, *SSARG News Letter March 2017*