

Editorial

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Methodological innovations and theoretical debates are the lifeblood of any discipline. Without them a field of inquiry stagnates: the questions it asks of its primary sources become limited, repeating themselves from research project to research project; assumptions and conclusions with little support are propagated and eventually become accepted fact. In the humanities, particularly in anthropology and archaeology, theoretical and methodological innovations have always been responsible for big leaps forward in the knowledge and understanding of the cultures being studied. The “New” Archaeology of the 1960s brought the humanities and the sciences closer together and, with it, revolutionised, for example, dating techniques and hence the chronology of prehistory. In archaeoastronomy too, the debate over the theory of high-precision alignments of prehistoric structures to celestial events, now called the “Thom paradigm”, led to the establishment of archaeoastronomy in the academic world (for instance, with the creation of its own journals, the organisation of its own conferences and its very own Professor of Archaeoastronomy, now Emeritus, Clive Ruggles).

It is with this in mind that the *Journal of Skyscape Archaeology* features a Forum section, where different views on particular points of contention can be debated and discussed. This issue features a forum on the topic of the minor lunar standstill. This phenomenon can be quite difficult to grasp at first, not only because of its observational peculiarities, but also because it is difficult to conceptually comprehend. This is attested by the variety of models, within the field of cultural astronomy, proposed to explain the phenomena of standstills, both major and minor. Nevertheless, since Thom first proposed the minor standstill as a target for the alignments of certain megalithic structures in the British Isles (1971), it has either joined the list of key celestial phenomena that archaeoastronomers look out for, or has been downright ignored. The topic remains as controversial today as Thom’s work was in the 1970s and 1980s. As editors, we would like to point out that while considering the debate it must be remembered that different geographical areas, cultures and time periods are being considered in relation to the phenomenon of the minor standstill and that the uses to which it was put, both architecturally and ritually, cannot be easily compared. We simply put these different views forward and leave it up to our readers to decide which interpretation/critique has the most appeal.

Lionel Sims opens up the debate by summarising what a lunar standstill is, focusing on a phenomenological definition of it. He goes on to analyse the archaeoastronomical literature, from which he extracts “three types of theories for lunar standstills varying according to researcher’s understanding of the relation between the minor and the major standstill”. Based primarily on archaeoastronomical work done in the British Isles, and referencing anthropology, Sims argues for a model that relies on the observation of the synchronicity between both major and minor lunar standstills with the solstice Sun displaying “emergent characteristics that reverse those of the lunar phase (synodic) cycle”. Sims claims that this is captured by the architecture of Stonehenge, which he considers to be “one architectural culmination of the NW European Neolithic/EBA monument building culture” and therefore a prime test-bed for the multiple models.

The debate continues with **A. César González-García**, who focuses on the cyclical nature of the standstill phenomenon and questions whether the conflation of the dark standstill Moon at winter solstice, such as proposed by Sims at Stonehenge, was observable. González-García also looks at the orientations and celestial alignments of prehistoric structures in other parts of Europe, particularly around the Mediterranean, to argue that the available data is much more complex than suggested by Sims. **Kim Malville** raises some concerns over the lack of published measurements on the upper Grand Trilithon window of Stonehenge – the architectural feature that supposedly aligned with the reversed-phase setting Moon during a minor standstill year. Malville then moves the debate to the American Southwest, where the evidence for cultural engagement with the major standstill, he argues, is much stronger than that for the minor standstill. The Forum concludes with a final reply by **Sims**, who in his critique of González-García and Malville addresses what he calls “paradigm fatigue” in order to move archaeoastronomy onto a wider interpretative foundation.

In addition to the Forum, this issue features three research papers. The first of these is titled “The Starry Deer Caiman and structure 44 at Yaxchilan, Chiapas, Mexico”, by **Stanislaw Iwaniszewski and Jesús Galindo Trejo**. They combine approaches from archaeoastronomy, archaeology, epigraphy and iconography and argue that this structure from Yaxchilan was seen as “a type of animate entity which is linked with the representation of the figure of the Starry Deer Caiman, one of the Maya Milky Way constellations”.

A second paper, by **Jeffrey R. Vadala and Susan Milbrath** also looks at an early Mayan site. In the paper, titled “Emergent Astronomical Knowledge and Historical Landscapes at the Preclassic Cerros, Belize”, the authors argue that the ancient Maya of Cerros “observed features in the coastal landscape that marked zenith events, and over time they constructed buildings to memorialize this observation point”. In the course of their argument the authors employed 3D modelling of the site and surrounding landscape to further explore the cosmological implications of spatial structure.

We then move to prehistoric Scotland for the final research article of this issue. In “The Solar-Lunar Orientations of the Orkney-Cromarty and Clava Cairns”, **Douglas Scott** details his surveys of the orientations of these two types of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments. The author concludes that “the passages of the cairns were deliberately aligned to allow the light of the Sun or the Moon to have entered the burial chamber”.

Judging by their proximity and similar orientation Scott also argues that the Clava Cairns, despite being a thousand years younger than the Orkney-Cromarty Cairns, were inspired by them.

This issue also features reviews of two important conferences on the subject of cultural astronomy. **Morgan Saletta** reviews the Astronomical Heritage Focus Meeting held at the 29th International Astronomical Union General Assembly which took place in Honolulu (Hawai'i) last year. The 23rd Meeting of the European Society for Astronomy in Culture, whose topic was "Astronomy in Past and Present Cultures", and was held in Rome (Italy) in November 2015, is also reviewed by **Roslyn M. Frank**.

We also feature three book reviews, the first of which continues (and concludes) **Liz Henty's** review of *The Handbook of Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy*, now focused on Part II ("Methods and Practice") of the volume, edited by Clive Ruggles. In addition, there is also a review of *Skyscapes: The Role and Importance of the Sky in Archaeology* (edited by Fabio Silva and Nicholas Campion) by **Timothy Insoll**, as well as a review by **Frank Prendergast** of Robert Hensey's *First Light: The Origins of Newgrange*.

This issue opens the sophomore year of the *Journal of Skyscape Archaeology*. The Editors could not be happier with the previous year and we are very pleased to have created a venue for research pieces and reviews on topics related to skyscape archaeology, published in a timely manner, and following rigorous academic standards. None of this could happen without the work of our assistant editor Caroline Ormrod, the support of Nicholas Campion, our Editorial Board and Equinox Publishing.

References

Thom, A., 1971. *Megalithic Lunar Observatories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.