

Fabio Silva and Nicholas Campion, editors, *Skyscapes: The Role and Importance of the Sky in Archaeology*

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This is a well-produced book stylistically with full-colour printing throughout and containing 11 contributions including the short preface and afterword. Four of the contributors are from the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture at the University of Wales Trinity St David, with a fifth from the School of Archaeology, History and Anthropology at the same institution, making it quite single institution reliant. Turning to the papers, these vary significantly in quality and in focus. The preface, "Meaning and Intent in Ancient Skyscapes – An Andean Perspective", is by J. McKim Malville and provides a brief introduction to relevant themes in research. The necessity of employing a multidisciplinary approach to understanding archaeoastronomy is emphasised with archaeology, cultural anthropology, linguistics, ethno-history and palaeo-hydrology all cited as relevant disciplines that should be drawn upon. The attention then shifts to the *huacas* of the Andes, sculpturally modified natural rocks, described as appearing "to demonstrate the presence of a different ontology" (p. x). The discussion is brief and leaves one feeling that much more could be presented, especially with regard to illustrative material, where, rather than using site photos exclusively, plans, distribution maps and diagrams could have been effectively employed to indicate the archaeoastronomical importance of the sites described.

Silva, in "The Role and Importance of the Sky in Archaeology: An Introduction", then provides a lengthier introduction focusing on defining "the role and importance of the sky in archaeology" (p. 1). Of interest is the discussion of the wider definition of the field of study in which archaeoastronomy sits as "cultural astronomy", the umbrella term for archaeoastronomy alongside ethnoastronomy and the history of astronomy and astrology (p. 2). Archaeoastronomy is also defined, and this description of the sub-discipline and related fields is useful for people like this reviewer, who know nothing about the subject, and probably, like many archaeologists, thought it the domain

of cranks and a small handful of serious archaeologists. Instead what emerges from Silva's introduction is that archaeoastronomy strives to interpret and understand past skylscapes in varied ways. It is apparent from reading this chapter and the volume as a whole that skylscapes have been neglected by archaeologists, which is potentially an omission of consequence when attempting to reconstruct all dimensions of past lives. Certainly, in the field that this reviewer knows best, African archaeology, only limited attempts have been made to explore archaeoastronomy (e.g. Holbrook *et al.* 2008), but it might help further understanding of monuments such as the numerous stone circles of Senegambia, for instance.

Another interesting paper, "Skylscapes: Locating Archaeoastronomy within Academia", is provided by Campion, who rightly argues that "landscapes do not exist without skylscapes" (p. 8). The discussion of the development of archaeoastronomy is useful for contextualising it as a field of research and in indicating the different approaches employed, whether it be the so-called "green" or "brown" archaeoastronomy (p. 15), both apparently dependent upon the varying degrees of statistics, surveying, and archaeological or ethnographic evidence drawn upon. Campion also argues for "skylscapes" being preferable to astronomy in encompassing more, thereby "constructing a fuller picture of ancient societies" (p. 17). This is a convincing rationale for why the term is employed; a usage which will hopefully gain wider currency, thereby allowing its fuller exploration within archaeology.

The third chapter, "An Examination of the Divide between Archaeoastronomy and Archaeology", is written by Henty. This initially provides an evaluation of why archaeoastronomy has been neglected by archaeologists, advancing the thesis that this is due to both archaeologists and archaeoastronomers lacking the "skill-sets that the other employs" (p. 20), meaning that the interpretations from both disciplines are incomplete. She then proceeds to provide a very detailed case study of Recumbent Stone Circles in northeast Scotland to indicate how different interpretations have been proposed for these monuments by both archaeologists and archaeoastronomers, which suggests their archaeoastronomical potential. There is a certain degree of repetition with the previous paper in dwelling on the "green" and "brown" archaeoastronomies that could have been edited out. There is also a contradiction as to the length of the session that gave rise to this volume: was it half a day, as Silva (p. 4) indicates, or a full day, as Henty (p. 30) recalls?

The fourth chapter, by Brown, "Skylscapes: Present and Past – From Sustainability to Interpreting Ancient Remains", contains some unsustainable assumptions as with, for example, the point that, "most ancient remains built by humans several millennia ago have a clear link to astronomy and encapsulate within them aspects of the daily rhythms of the sun or the moon and other celestial objects" (p. 32). It is also rather poorly written stylistically. The core of the paper is however commendable, i.e. developing and reporting upon an Astronomy in the Park project taking place in the Peak District National Park. It is wholly unclear, however, how Van Gennep's famous rites of passage can be equated with the phases of the dark sky project (p. 38) and why that model "has been put forward as a way ancient societies would have engaged with their monuments

in a ritual fashion" (p. 38). This would be more convincing if both the monuments and societies were defined.

We then move to the West Kennet Avenue in Sims' paper, "30b – the West Kennet Avenue Stone that Never was: Interpretation by Multidisciplinary Triangulation and Emergence through Four Field Anthropology". Again, a multi-disciplinary approach is rightly emphasised but would benefit from a fuller expansion of the author's theoretical approach, rather than very generally referring to "reconstructing the lost complexity of ancient cultures which will allow discriminating between extant ethnographic theories" (p. 42) and then linking this to one of Sims' own publications. More detail is required on what comprises these "extant ethnographic theories", particularly as they might pertain to the British Neolithic. A detailed examination of previous research on West Kennet Avenue and Sims' archaeoastronomical reinterpretation is then provided, including diagrams of, for example, elevations and possible alignments, which helps guide the reader through his argument. It is an interesting paper which proposes a hypothesis of cattle-wealthy patriarchs monopolising ancient dark Moon rituals by transposing them onto solar cycles (p. 56) but, stone orientations and patterns of archaeological deposition aside, is very difficult to prove to any convincing degree.

Chapter 6, "Can Archaeoastronomy inform Archaeology on the Building Chronology of the Mnajdra Neolithic Temple in Malta?", shifts the focus outside the British Isles through Lomsdalen's engaging paper on the Mnajdra Neolithic Temple in Malta. Both archaeological and archaeoastronomical data is integrated to establish the building chronology and, although this reviewer is not qualified to assess the data presented, it is interesting in suggesting a "redefined constructional chronology" (p. 72) based on these data sets, and that archaeoastronomy influenced some of the building phases over a c. 1500-year sequence. Non-European material is then presented in Brady's chapter on the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts of Ancient Egypt, "Star phases: The Naked-eye astronomy of the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts", a paper so specialised that it is beyond this reviewer's capabilities to offer informed comment.

Prendergast's subsequent chapter, "An Architectural Perspective on Structured Sacred Space – Recent evidence from Iron Age Ireland", shifts attention back to Europe, to the archaeologically elusive Irish Iron Age in particular, with the main point of discussion the possible Iron Age temple site at Lismullin. An intriguing site and, again, an interesting paper that draws upon the meticulous site survey data available to explore the concept of sacred space and examine this in relation to its possible cosmological meaning in the past. One unfortunate error was noted in this paper though: the "Ingold (2007)" quote and the reference it is drawn from (pp. 102, 104) is actually a paper written by this reviewer – hence Insoll, not Ingold (Insoll 2007)!

Chapter 9, "The Circumpolar Skyscape of a Pembrokeshire Dolmen", continues the British Isles theme with Pritchard's study of the "King's Quoit" dolmen in Pembrokeshire, Wales. The methodology employed in attempting to reconstruct the possible former astronomical importance of the monument is described, and interpretation supported with sky map diagrams, along with a reconstruction of the horizon as it might have appeared during the Early Neolithic (p. 115). The argument is weaker where it is suggested

that, based in part on ethnographic analogy of “socially ‘complex’ hunter gather [sic] societies”, that the Quoit might have been “a secluded viewing platform for a specialist elder or elders to determine, by astronomy, the most important time to gather resources for solstitial feasting, or to travel to a gathering” (p. 117). Overall, however, this is a chapter that does well to integrate archaeological and archaeoastronomical data in a way that emphasises that what is proposed are “suggestions” (p. 117).

The final case study chapter, “The View from Within: A ‘Time-Space-Action’ Approach to Megalithism in Central Portugal”, is again by Silva and provides an excursion to the Neolithic megalithic dolmens of central Portugal, monuments explored using methodology from archaeoastronomy and landscape archaeology. This involved measuring the “window of visibility” from the dolmen (p. 124), i.e. the maximum extent of the horizon that could be seen from the dolmen chamber. This, it is argued, gives a potential phenomenological insight into how the views from within these dolmens would have been experienced. The methodological problems encountered are recognised, as with the differences in view caused by varying modern and Neolithic vegetation, and a good series of reconstruction images of what the views might have been are provided. This indicates, convincingly, that largely the focus seems to have been upon a single feature, the *Serra de Estrela*, and this may in turn have been connected with the rising of Aldebaran and perhaps seasonal movements, though whether it was regarded “as the heavenly abode of the dead ancestors” (p. 133) is conjectural. Finally, Tim Darvill provides an afterword, “Dances beneath a Diamond Sky”.

Initially, it seems that the material presented in this volume with its largely European, particularly British, emphasis is similar, but this impression is false as it is, in reality, highly varied, both in how the authors approach their material within the overall parameters of attempting to employ archaeological and archaeoastronomical data in reconstructing past skylscapes and in how successfully they achieve this. The volume is a success in indicating that skylscapes should not be ignored and that archaeologists are wrong to label all archaeoastronomy as on the “fringe” or, alternatively, to wholly ignore it. Skylscapes matter, and this book illustrates how and why. It is hoped that other scholars will now pick up the challenge and attempt to reconstruct past skylscapes in other periods, contexts and areas of the world.

References

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