

Marion Dowd and Robert Hensey, editors, *The Archaeology of Darkness*

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It is quite daring for a volume to title itself "*The Archaeology of...*"; examples of such volumes that went on to become successful textbooks include *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* (Parker Pearson 2003) and *The Archaeology of Disease* (Roberts and Manchester 2010). To its credit, this volume doesn't attempt to be an authoritative and final work on this topic, but merely to highlight it and, therefore, open the archaeology of darkness up for future research. In this, it is remarkably successful.

The book is the outcome of a 2012 conference titled "Into the Earth: The Archaeology of Darkness", held at the Institute of Technology Sligo (Ireland), which gathered all of the volume contributors plus a few other speakers who are not represented in the work. Through its thirteen chapters, the volume attempts to draw out several ways in which varied cultures from across the globe and several time periods – ranging from the Upper Palaeolithic to modern times – have related to darkness and how that engagement can be inferred from the archaeological record.

The volume opens with Robert Hensey's chapter, titled "Past Dark: A Short Introduction to the Human Relationship with Darkness Over Time", which highlights what little prior research has been done on this topic, as well as identifying the gaps that future research needs to address – some of which are covered by later chapters. In particular, Hensey emphasises the multiple meanings of darkness: "the dark of night; the darkness of deep winter; the darkness of the subterranean world; darkness as a metaphor we live by" (p. 1). Indeed, darkness would have very different meanings for different cultures and time periods: Hensey successfully stresses that the night was conceptualised differently in the West before the introduction of street-lighting (p. 2); this leads to how we talk about dark-

ness, since its many types and degrees should aptly lead to talk not of “darkness”, but of “opaque”, “crepuscular”, “pitch-black”, etc. (p. 4). This is a point with which other contributors to the volume did not engage, often leading to confusion and especially between what one might term “darkness” and “shadow”, a point we will return to below.

The second chapter, “Darkness Visible: Shadows, Art and the Ritual Experience of Caves in Upper Palaeolithic Europe”, by Paul Pettitt, steps back in time to consider Upper Palaeolithic rock art. This chapter opens up by offering a compelling case for current rock art studies not to be driven by the theoretical extremes of over-generalisation nor the “postmodern trend that emphasised the regionally unique and culturally contingent nature of human behaviour” (p. 12), but, instead, to take a middle path that recognises the many similarities that “show that cave art does reflect geographically dispersed and chronologically persistent themes” (p. 13). Pettitt then explores the role of darkness in the caves of the Upper Palaeolithic; for example, by highlighting the dichotomy between the evidence for domestic activity, “restricted to cave exteriors and large cave mouths” (p. 13), and the more “prosaic” activities that are confined to the dark zones where “light stops, life stops” (p. 13). The interrelation between the caves’ architecture and natural light creates a gradation from the bright outside into the darkness of the deep cave that would not have been unnoticed. Now fully in the deepest part of the caves, where most art is found, Pettitt considers the role of artificial light and shadow in the art itself. Pettitt suggests that “darkness itself forms the ‘landscape context’ of cave art”, and he mentions the “numerous examples where it has been used to ‘finish’ otherwise complete images” (p. 17), giving the famous example of the falling horse at Lascaux. Overall, he makes a strong case for the role of the various shades of darkness in the emic meaning and purpose of the Upper Palaeolithic caves and the art they contain.

In “Between Symbol and Senses: The Role of Darkness in Ritual in Prehistoric Italy”, Ruth D. Whitehouse takes a more theoretical turn, but without ever leaving behind the safety of ground-truthing her ideas within the Neolithic caves of Italy. The three caves that she picked as case studies offer plenty of material, ritual in nature, leading her to argue that they were “used for rites of passage, including initiation rites” (p. 28). She explores the role of darkness by considering its part in a symbolic system that contraposes darkness and light. This dichotomy between light and darkness is prone to a structuralist formulation (e.g. Levi-Strauss 1963) that opposes these two elements. Such a binary opposition can then be correlated with several others, such as secular and sacred, or above ground and underground (p. 30). Structuralism became unfashionable long ago, and Whitehouse herself claims to be “less enamoured with structuralism” today, but the points she raises are no less interesting and potentially applicable to other case studies, including most other chapters in this volume. She also raises the experiential issues arising from immersing oneself in darkness, such as disorientation; loss of sense of time; and the sharpening of the non-visual senses, such as sound, the nature of which changes dramatically in a cave, or smell, which senses the dampness and lack of fresh air (p. 33–34). Finally, she brings these elements together to suggest that the darkness of these Neolithic caves creates a sense of separation; from light, from the community, from the outside world, that would have been a key element (if not *the* key element)

of prehistoric rites of passage (van Gennep 1960) in which “the physical context of the caves – their tunnels, passages and corridors to be negotiated and thresholds to be crossed – provided a metaphor for the journey of the rite of passage” (p. 35).

An Archaeology of the Senses, by Robin Skeates (2010), stands as a unique volume that deals with the often-ignored topic of the non-visual dimensions of the archaeological record. This is, of course, something that cannot possibly be ignored when considering darkness. However, in his chapter in *The Archaeology of Darkness*, entitled “Experiencing Darkness and Light in Caves: Later Prehistoric Examples from Suelo in Central Sardinia”, Skeates rather repeats the thoughts and ideas of the previous two chapters but applies them to the material reality of a couple of late prehistoric caves from Sardinia. He highlights that the material deposits found within these caves might very well represent a series of “repeated short-term occupations [...] but, given the deposition of special artefacts and of large quantities of animal bones and pottery vessels [...] a more ceremonial interpretation is equally possible” (p. 44). In addition, he stresses the role of the light/darkness effect in the experience of these caves, in a similar fashion to that explored, in much more depth, by Pettitt in chapter 2.

In the fifth chapter, “The Dark Side of the Sky: The Orientations of Earlier Prehistoric Monuments in Ireland and Britain”, Richard Bradley takes a diachronic look at the orientations, looking for continuity and change in their relationship to the Sun. He identifies four phases of development, spanning the period 3700 BC to 800 BC: during phase 1, in the Early and Middle Neolithic, “few monuments had precise alignments” (p. 55) and those that did (“long barrows and long cairns”) seem to have been largely directed towards the morning Sun; phase 2, spanning the Late Neolithic when henges and circles of timber or stone began to appear, brought more precise alignments to sunrise or sunset; phase 3, the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age, focused on an intensification and expansion of key ceremonial centres, such as Maeshowe and Durrington Walls, but “few structures explicitly reference the sunrise, and many more are directed towards the south-west, west and sometimes the north-west” (p. 56); and in phase 4, from 1,500 BC to 800 BC, roundhouses, domestic enclosures and late stone circles dominated the monumental record with their “orientations between the east and the south” (p. 57).

Bradley’s chapter is undoubtedly one of the most interesting to readers of the *Journal of Skyscape Archaeology*, and as such it demands that I devote several paragraphs to it. Neat as the diachronic division presented in his table 5.2 (p. 56) might seem, it relies entirely on the assumption of solar alignments (p. 57–58). Such a solarist emphasis has beset megalithic archaeoastronomy for decades and, therefore, it is no wonder that archaeologists too fall into its trap. Its key principle – that the Sun would be the most important celestial object – betrays a western, modernist view of the sky, in which no-one knows the current lunar phase, nor can they see the stars in today’s light-polluted cityscapes. But the experience of pre-modern peoples would have been quite different, as highlighted by some contributors to this volume. The changing face of the Moon or the mystery of the stars may have been more attractive. In effect, the ethnographic and historical records attest to, if anything, an equal interest in Sun, Moon and stars for most cultures (e.g. Hayden and Villeneuve 2011; Campion 2012).

However, the solarist assumption has not only plagued megalithic archaeoastronomy from an interpretative point of view, but also from a methodological one. Often, the mere identification of an orientation that matches, say, a solstice sunrise, has been used as proof of that alignment, whereas questions of orientation, uncertainty and multiplicity of targets have been ignored for decades. Most often, due to the rough nature of many megalithic monuments, the orientation cannot be measured to within the instrument's precision, therefore leading to large error bars that might very well encompass an obvious solar alignment, but can also include alternative interpretations. I would argue that choosing between differing hypotheses should not be based on *a priori* biases, but on the wider archaeological and cultural context (Silva, forthcoming). As I have elsewhere demonstrated for a particular cluster of passage graves in central Portugal, monuments that, from a solarist perspective, are thought not to have precise alignments, might actually encode alignments to other objects, such as particularly bright stars (Silva 2014, 2015). Other, few but recent, works have also highlighted alternative, but no less valid, interpretations for some of the structures discussed by Bradley in his chapter (e.g. Harding *et al.* 2006; Henty 2014; Armstrong 2015). These suggestions in themselves throw serious questions over Bradley's conclusions and demand a fresh, in-depth and celestially unbiased take on the important issue of continuity and change raised in this chapter.

The volume continues with chapter six, "In Search of Darkness: Cave Use in Late Bronze Age Ireland", by one of the volume editors, Marion Dowd. The reason why this period is interesting is because, both before and after it, cave activities in Ireland have involved "burial, excarnation and votive deposition in the outer parts of caves, frequently within the daylight zone and usually less than 20m inside cave entrances" (p. 64). However, in the LBA (Late Bronze Age), the deepest, darkest regions of the caves were explored, with human bodies, loose bones, animal remains and other artefacts attesting to this. Dowd suggests that these excursions were "symbolically redolent [...] journeys into a liminal realm where the spirit world could be accessed, and where emotional, mental and psychic revelation awaited" (p. 64–65). The evidence indicates that the "rituals conducted inside the caves were to some extent personal and private" (p. 67). Dowd recognises the rite of passage hypothesis (see Whitehouse's chapter, as discussed above), but prefers an alternative interpretation: that of "ritual specialists retiring to caves for periods of time to engage in contemplation, spiritual growth or to enter altered states of consciousness" (p. 70).

We jump across the Irish sea and into Wales for Sian James' chapter on Bronze Age and post-medieval copper mining in Llandudno, titled, "Digging into the Darkness: The Experience of Copper Mining in the Great Orme, North Wales". James focuses on the superstitious aspects of mining in deep, dark caves where the "light emitted by a candle, together with the noise of dripping water and hammering, would have created environments ripe for the birth of superstitions" (p. 81). In this way, both the prehistoric deposits and the post-medieval ones are interpreted as deliberate, "left by miners as offerings to substitute for the copper taken from the ground" (p. 78). This makes for a very interesting, and different, chapter that engages with folklore and the belief in subterranean

spirits, the *knockers*, that inhabit the mines. However, one is left wondering how much the post-medieval reality is dictating, or influencing, the prehistoric interpretation.

With Sue Hamilton and Colin Richards' chapter, "Between Realms: Entering the Darkness of the *Hare Paenga* in Ancient Rapa Nui (Easter Island)", the reader takes a leap to the Pacific. The *hare paenga* are canoe-shaped houses with a very low, narrow entrance, enclosed a dark, sense-numbing space that, by its nature and contrast to the outside world, would be associated with the cosmological *Po*, the "darkness, underworld, inner, earth, female" (p. 89) principle or realm. This places them in contradistinction to the other, major architectural feature of the island, the *ahu* platforms, upon which stood the famous *moai* statues. These are located in especially close proximity to the sea and therefore "wrap the island in a ring of monumentality" (p. 97) that contains the opposite cosmological principle of *Ao* – light, upper-world, outer, sky, male. The action of entering a *hare paenga* to sleep would involve a cosmological movement between "the everyday realm of *Ao* [and] the sacred realm of *Po*" (p. 97), a movement that would also represent the passage from land to the sea.

In chapter nine, "Dark Places and Supernatural Light in Early Ireland", John Carey looks at darkness in early Irish literature and highlights one of the qualifications of a master poet, which was *imbas for-osnai*, the "great knowledge that illuminates" (p. 102), emphasising his ability to see what others cannot see, to light up what for others is darkness. Carey's research emphasises the role of isolation "to a dark place, ritual behaviour, and supernatural knowledge revealed in sleep" (p. 103), echoing both the contemplations in LBA caves of Dowd's chapter and the dream incubation techniques of the Classical period (e.g. Nielsen 1988).

The question of whether the dark is really universally associated with danger, death and evil is addressed by Charlotte Damm in the volume's tenth chapter, titled "Enfolded by the Long Winter's Night". Quoting extensive experience living within the Arctic Circle, where darkness is a constant for about two months around the winter solstice, and complemented by the ethnographic and historical records, Damm vividly portrays the life of both modern and ancient Arctic inhabitants in Scandinavia, Greenland and Canada. Setting the scene by going through topics such as travel and the provision of heat and artificial light, it becomes clear that, despite the anxiety caused by the lack of certainty over the winter, this period is not one of depression and lethargy, but one of great activity. This leads Damm to conclude that "the perception of darkness would still seem to be linked to regional particularities, and historical and economic circumstances" (p. 114), a conclusion that one could hardly disagree with.

Moving into the modern world, Gillian Allmond looks at the Victorian and Edwardian discourses on the dichotomy between darkness and light in relation to mental illness in her chapter "'The Outer Darkness of Madness' – the Edwardian Winter Garden at Purdysburn Public Asylum for the Insane". With recourse to contemporaneous texts, she highlights associations of darkness with madness, barbarism, disease, tranquillity, depression and pollution (p. 118–120). Such associations bear on the material reality of Edwardian times, as Allmond demonstrates by looking at the Winter Garden built at Purdysburn Asylum near Belfast, which, she concludes, "was constructed to offer patients the benefit of the therapeutic qualities that light was thought to possess" (p. 125).

Tim O’Connell gives a very rich, detailed and personal view of modern caving in chapter twelve, simply titled “Descent into Darkness”. He says that caving is a “sensory feast in a unique environment [...] A total, immersive experience for all the senses, moving from outside to inside” (p. 131–132). O’Connell describes his experiences as part of an expedition to Krubera cave in Abkhazia, the deepest known cave in the world, which is over 2 km deep. The most vivid description comes at the very end, as he re-emerges after nine long days in the cave and re-experiences the outside world where “the intense variety of textures and colours [...] becomes apparent, the infinite variety of colours and the unbelievably crisp outlines of a tree set against the sky. Smells are sharper, sounds are noticeably different” (p. 135). He concludes by suggesting that caving “isn’t purposeful [...] Perhaps the value is intrinsic, and recognised by few of us strange creatures” (p. 136) – an interesting thought that is in sharp contrast with ideas put forward in previous chapters.

Gabriel Cooney concludes the volume by providing an afterword, “Coming In and Out of the Dark”, that draws together the threads woven by the previous contributors. He focuses on three elements, which are beautifully illustrated by the contributors in the volume. The first is that the cultural context dictates how a society experiences and perceives darkness. The second point is the complementarity of darkness and light. His third, and final point, is the volume’s focus on caves, since the “record of the use of caves not only covers the history of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, but extends back to earlier hominin species” (p. 142). Overall, this short, but to the point, concluding chapter ties in some loose ends and brings in some new references that enrich the topic and the volume as a whole.

As this review draws to its inevitable end, I would like to take Cooney’s lead and further highlight two points that the volume has raised in my mind. They are notable not for their presence but, like darkness itself, for their absence from the volume. However, I wish to present them not as critiques, but as points that I believe are worthy of further contemplation as the concept of darkness in archaeological studies rises from the solid foundations laid out by this volume.

The first point I would like to raise is the confusion over what each author is referring to when they use the term “darkness”. Sometimes, as in the case of Pettitt, the same author uses that term to describe the “darkness of caves – where no natural light shines” (p. 14), as well as the more aptly called shadows, that “structure where art was placed and [...] finish what to our modern eyes are incomplete images” (p. 17). This confusion between different meanings and levels of darkness was highlighted by Hensey in the very first chapter, and it does leave one wondering whether, sometimes, we are projecting our own modern biases on what constitutes darkness to the past.

This leads to the second point: the absence of the night sky from this volume. As mentioned above, Bradley’s chapter is the only one to directly engage with the skyscape, but his emphasis on the Sun leaves behind the wonderment of the night sky and its inhabitants, who cannot but share some level of engagement with darkness. Jones is the only author to correctly mention that “without light pollution from artificial light sources, stars and Moon would have appeared brighter so night-time was not necessarily gloomy or dim” (p. 77). Although this is certainly not the daily (or nightly) experience of

the modern westerner, it doesn't take much to walk outside the city on a Quarter or Full Moon night and observe that the Moon is bright enough to pierce the darkness, illuminate one's path and even cast shadows. The stars, on a modern Dark Sky reserve, can overwhelm the modern westerner who has lost touch with the reality of the night sky: it is neither dark nor gloomy, but a canvas of light and colour. Darkness, the night sky type of darkness, would have been quite distinct from the absolute darkness of the cave or the interior of the passage grave.

As a whole, the volume draws together an impressive compendium of ways with which humans, both prehistoric and more recent, engage with darkness. We have darkness being related to embodied and sensorial experiences (chapters 2, 3, 4 and 12); art (chapters 2 and 4); ritual and supernatural revelation (chapters 3, 4, 6 and 9); cosmology (chapter 8); superstition (chapter 7); the sky (chapter 5); survival (chapter 10) and mental illness (chapter 11). Despite the necessary work that still lies ahead, this book succeeds in making the reader think about darkness. As such, I'd thoroughly recommend the volume to both aspiring and established archaeologists with an interest in skylscapes, landscapes and art, particularly in how they relate to ritual, belief and experience.

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