Editorial

The times they are a-changin’. Eight years ago, when we started the JSA enterprise, archaeologists’ perception of archaeoastronomy was at the forefront of our concerns. Surveys done by one of us at key archaeology conferences and in online archaeology groups demonstrated that some archaeologists, especially the younger generations, had an interest in the topic, but they also showed some apprehension (Henty 2020). The readers of this journal don’t need to be reminded of the historical reasons for this apprehension, but the key point is that eight years ago there were no clear signs of improvement. This year, however, provided the most tangible evidence that the tide is most definitely turning – *The World of Stonehenge* exhibition in the British Museum.

This exhibition cleverly uses the famous English stone circle as a framing device to look at prehistoric Britain and Europe from around 4000 to 1000 BC, focusing on the significant transformations that changed societies back then and set them on the course towards the historical periods. The exhibition itself is one of those must-see epic events of a lifetime (not unlike the *Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibition that toured the world in the 1970s), with a fantastic collection of British and European artefacts – including the Star Carr antler headdress and the Nebra disc – brought together under the same roof. But, perhaps the most impressive feature is how embedded the skyscape is throughout the exhibition.

Before even one enters the exhibition hall one is enticed to go in by photos of Stonehenge under a starry night sky. Once inside, the “sky” features in almost every single display, from the very first panel to the last. Often, this was the only feature of the descriptive and contextual panel attached to some objects, but not always for the most obvious ones, such as the Nebra disc. The exhibition space itself was designed to encapsulate the alignment of Stonehenge through a gap in the displays that aligns with a repeating animation of the setting Sun (although this may be missed by the majority of attendees, since not enough attention is placed on it). As the authors of the exhibition catalogue put it:

> In a world without light pollution or scientific knowledge of the stars, the clear night sky was an incredible spectacle. During daylight hours, and perhaps especially during the shortening days of winter, the sun would dominate daily and seasonal routines, particularly for farmers reliant on the fortunes of their crops.

*(Garrow and Wilkin 2022, 21)*
The catalogue is split into five chapters, each of which encapsulates one of the core themes running through the whole exhibition: nature, stone, sky, mobility and sea. Chapter 3 engages with structural alignments, sun-discs, golden hats, solar collars and chariots, symbolic depictions of horses and boats associated with the Sun and, of course, the Nebra disc itself. It does a fantastic job in illustrating the obsession of Bronze Age people with the Sun and how we may be able to touch upon related belief systems from their material culture. However, the key point to get across is that here we have hard evidence that the skyscape is receiving as much attention as any other theme that has historical importance, not only to the field of archaeology but also to our understanding of the past more broadly. Furthermore, due to the significant popularity of this exhibition, this is sure to prime future archaeologists and enthusiasts to think as much about the skyscape as about the landscape.

However, the exhibition is not without its flaws. For example, there is a clear bias in favour of the Sun to the detriment of other celestial explanations. This is, perhaps, not surprising, as the bulk of the exhibition focuses on the Bronze Age but, as the quote above illustrates, Western perceptions of what is important and significant in the skyscape are being projected onto the past, perhaps sometimes erroneously. But this too is good news. It means that there is scope for improvement. It demonstrates the need for closer dialogue between the fields, since it is only through engaging with the skyscapes of non-Western societies, past and present, that one can expand one’s views, recognise and limit one’s biases. Archaeology needs skyscapes as much as skyscapes need archaeology. It should now be our collective task to engage with and consolidate this newfound bond.

In the first of our two research papers, “Angkor Wat: Lotus Temple at the Intersection of Celestial Azimuths”, William F. Romain considers the location of the site relative to other temples in the region, suggesting that astronomical lines of sight symbolically connect Khmer religious structures with both landscape and skyscapes. This is followed by our second research article, “The Guiding Sky: Funerary Orientation and Nomadic Movements in Somaliland during Antiquity”, which presents an astronomical assessment of cairns and burial sites from the First through Third Century AD. Authors Carolina Cornax Gómez, A. César González García and Jorge de Torres Rodríguez find evidence for astronomical alignments, which may reflect the patterns of seasonal movements and practices of the pre-Islamic Horn of Africa.

Ibrahim Allawi’s 1988 chapter “Some Evolutionary and Cosmological Aspects to Early Islamic Town Planning” has been somewhat influential within the field of cultural astronomy (e.g. Campion 2016). However, in the intervening 34 years a lot of research has been done both from a textual and archaeological lens. Therefore, we have invited two scholars with complementary expertise, Andrew Petersen and Stefan Kamola, to write critical commentaries that contextualise Allawi’s paper within more recent research into the topic of cosmological aspects of Islamic architecture, as well as the problematic of textual vs archaeological sources. Together, they shed further light on the potential links between early Islamic cosmology and architecture.

While skyscape archaeologists and archaeoastronomers acknowledge the spectacular brilliance of the Milky Way in the night sky, only rarely does it feature in their
research. To find out more about it, its history, cultural alignments and mythology, we invited contributions for a Forum, which is published in this issue. Taking part are Carolyn Kennett, Bernadette Brady, John Grigsby, Steven Gullberg, Bradley T. Lepper, William F. Romain and Alejandro Martín López. Their interesting pieces offer unique insights about the Milky Way and underline the importance of taking it into account.

In-person conferences are still slow in getting up and running again after the hiatus caused by the coronavirus pandemic, but in this issue Liz Henty reviews the online session, “Life in the Land of the Dead: Skyscape Archaeology and the Ontology of Other Worlds”, which took place at the Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference organised by *Antiquity* on 18th December, 2021. Jointly hosted by Fabio Silva and Timothy Darvill, it included a number of interesting ideas and well-illustrated presentations followed by discussions, which kept the audience fully engaged.

Efrosyni Boutsikas’ book *The Cosmos in Ancient Greek Religious Experience: Sacred Space, Memory and Cognition* is an attempt by the author to reconstruct the meaning of “Greek religion” through recovering its essential components such as myth and ritual in their temporal and spatial contexts, as our reviewer Mai A. Rashed discovered. In a second review of the same book, Ilaria Cristofaro concludes that it is a welcome addition to the corpus of skyscape archaeology books, as it helps to bridge the gap between archaeology and astronomy, while tracing the right path for further research on the topic. Moving away from Classical Greece, E. C. Krupp takes a broader view of how people connect with their universe. His thoughts are prompted by Jo Marchant’s *The Human Cosmos: A Secret History of the Stars*, which he reviews for us. He finds that the author’s enthusiasm and fund of anecdotes paint a view whereby we understand how we are affected by our understanding of the cosmos and our experience of the night sky.

References


