Review of Session 9, “Life in the Land of the Dead: Skyscape Archaeology and the Ontology of Other Worlds”, organised by Lionel Sims, Fabio Silva and Timothy Darvill. 18th December, 2021 at the Online Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference, hosted by Antiquity

Liz Henty
University of Wales Trinity Saint David
lizhenty2@gmail.com

Of the many sessions on offer at the Theoretical Archaeology Conference 2021, this was the one I was most looking forward to. Yet, at the same time there was sadness because Lionel Sims, the lead organiser, colleague and friend, died shortly before the event and is much missed. The first Skyscapes session took place at TAG 2012 and, in their appearances for the next few years, Lionel cut a charismatic figure as he demonstrated his knowledge of and theories about iconic prehistoric monuments in the south of England. His co-organisers Timothy Darvill and Fabio Silva paid tribute and ably took over the hosting duties for an audience of over forty attendees.

The premise of the session was that skyscape archaeology, through studying the relationships between events in the sky and the archaeological record, could provide insights into the ontologies of different societies. The nine presentations showed how differently this brief could be considered. Some were explicitly theoretical, while others relied on case studies, so overall the session had something to interest everyone.

First up was Fabio Silva, who presented “Skyscape Archaeology as Ontological Turn: Towards an Archaeoastronomy Rooted in Modern Archaeological Theory”. In his introduction to ontology, he reflected on the earlier literature stemming from anthropology about how we can make sense of not just our own world but that of other worlds beyond our imagination, but to do so requires finding a new way of translating other people’s concepts. Influenced by Holbraad and Pedersen’s (2017) strictures for the turn to ontology, Silva applied these thoughts to skyscape archaeology to suggest that for it to be successful it is not a question of just trying to explain why people did what they did; we have to understand what it is they were doing. Through turning to ontology we are asking different questions, in which experimentation and playfulness are key. He concluded that because of this different style of engagement we must free ourselves up to enable the possibility of finding new concepts.
Daniel Brown, in “Capturing Contemporary Skyscape Experiences: The Present Informing the Past”, described his personal experience of moving away from the restrictions of archaeoastronomy to find a more meaningful experience of the skyscape through reflexivity and phenomenology. This allowed him to answer the question of how one becomes part of a place within the landscape and skyscape, noting that this approach is the difference between detached observation and immersive watching. Expanding on this further, he described the Writing Skyscape Exhibition (see NAM 2021), which allowed the contemporary skyscape to be explored through images, poetry and creative writing.

Apart from the amazing research into Chinese cosmology carried out by David Pankenier (see, for example, Pankenier 2013), little is known in the West about Chinese archaeoastronomical orientations, so Yuqing Chen’s presentation, “Beliefs and Cosmology: The Orientation of Graves in Neolithic China”, opened up a whole new area for exploration. Her preliminary research has shown that there is some consistency in the dates and direction of burial orientations at certain sites, though these differ geographically. For example, at the Xipo site (3300–2900 BC), the direction of the head is more important than that of the feet, with the vast majority of graves mainly oriented towards the equinoctial region in the west. This western range also exists in Yangguanzhai and, in the cosmology of this region, west was the direction of end of life. Yet in Wangyin the consistency of orientation was to the east, a direction which also represents rebirth so the people there might have had a different cosmology relating to life and death. Additionally, at a separate site in Yaoshan, the burials were oriented towards the south. Chen felt that this may indicate that there was a tradition relating to the seasonality of certain important constellations. To date only solstitial or equinoctial alignments have been discussed for these sites, with no mention of lunar or stellar referents and so Chen’s research opens up intriguing possibilities.

Back in Europe, Marc Frincu took us to Serbia with a nod to the Stonehenge winter solstice alignment, in “The Vrsac Circles in Serbia: Worshipping Life and Rebirth in the Neolithic”. These circles date back to the fifth millennium BC in a site that contains five concentric earthworks with a possible processional route towards the east. The nearby Vrsac mountains may have been the inspiration for their layout, as the winter solstice sunrise, the minor lunar standstill rise and the helical rising of Antares can be seen over them. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss’ theory of binary oppositions, Frincu suggested that this region in Serbia demonstrates evidence of belief in a three-tiered cosmos deriving from the axis mundi: the upper world (heavens) the middle world (Earth) and the underworld.

Trying to make sense of prehistoric worldviews from such a vast distance in time is not easy but Gail Higginbottom gave us some pointers in “Making Worlds in the Landscape”. She reviewed how her work gives primacy to how different peoples had different conceptual worldviews. For an example, she looked at standing stones in the west of Scotland, placing them in their scenario of landscape and skyscape, before showing how celestial events could be seen on the horizon using planetarium images from Horizon (2020) and Stellarium (2020). She argued that with planetarium software you can see what the monument builders saw, particularly how the light and dark played along the horizon. This type of research is not new and many archaeoastronomers regularly
use such software to confirm results found on the ground, but it must be remembered that these “insights” are often used to answer pre-formed questions, which in turn are informed by what “events” archaeoastronomers normally look for.

Staying in Scotland, Thomas Legendre looked at the prehistoric sites at Kilmartin Glen in “Rock is Dead, Long Live Rock: a Quantum Archaeology of the Neolithic”. He highlighted the sounds involved in creating rock art; acts which blend the experience of human activities with non-human objects. This he argued can be accessed through Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) as theorised by Graham Harman (2018; see also Morton 2013). OOO rejects subject–object relationships in favour of object–object relationships, where humans are objects and there is no ontological difference between the two. Citing Harman, he suggested that events are also objects, so that everything is interrelated. All understanding is metaphorical. In the totality of order there cannot be a distinction between organic and inorganic, because of the deep symbiosis between them.

If that is theoretically true, how can different aspects of societal behaviour be understood? There is no more symbiotic relationship than that between life and death and this is what Marc Türler explored in “Plausible Representations of the Cycle of Life and Death in Irish Megalithic Art”. He posed the question of how dualities such as night and day (reminding us that as one increases, the other decreases) can be found in rock art. He argued that the images carved in rock, whether they be triangles, lozenges, spirals or wavy lines, actually represented celestial movements. A circle on its own doesn’t show this movement but a spiral can be read as a cycle. Some of the art, especially spirals with a flat bottom, could have been created with the aid of a gnomon, thus indicating the cut-off time of the equinoxes. For him, a double spiral represents respectively spring/summer and autumn/winter. A more speculative suggestion was that the third connected spiral at the Neolithic passage grave of Newgrange in Ireland represented the afterlife or the underworld, which would be a fitting image for any funerary monument.

Sandwiched between these last two talks, and on the other side of the Atlantic, William Romain looked at the possible significance of the Milky Way in the cosmology of the Native American Indians at Cahokia in his presentation, entitled “Crossing to the Land of the Dead: Earthen Causeways at Cahokia and the Milky Way Path of Souls” (see also Romain 2021). He argued that ethnographic literature relating to many Native American tribes showed their belief that in their eyes the Milky Way was the path taken by the souls of the dead. For him this idea is most spectacularly laid out in the Cahokian Rattlesnake Causeway. He also introduced us to a painting by Norval Morrisseau, a Native American shaman and artist, who created breathtaking cosmological paintings which seem to timelessly span the transition from the past to the present and from life to death. In addition to this, Romain accompanied his talk with beautiful images which demonstrate the intriguing aspects of the Rattlesnake Causeway.

Drawing the session to a close, the last presentation, “Shadows and Light: Turning the World Inside Out”, was by Timothy Darvill. He talked about ontologies, naturalism, totemism analogism and animism – to ask the bigger question of how we can discover prehistoric ontology. We need to conceive of different relationships where people are part of the relational world, and Darvill suggested that perhaps animism is how we can
recover this. In other words, we need connective epistemologies to link ours and their worlds. In this regard he introduced us to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who developed cosmological perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 2012). Attempting to put the theories to the test, Darvill recounted his experience at the Avebury complex in Wiltshire. Marking the centre of the northern ring in Avebury’s stone circle are two large standing stones known as The Cove. It was there, at the time of the summer solstice sunrise, that he noted that his shadow was projected onto the largest stone. Wondering whether this light-and-shadow phenomenon, which became animated as he moved, together with a possible acoustic effect from the positioning of the stones, could have been significant, he argued that revisiting sites in this way was the best way to get into the mindset of the builders’ ontology. Echoing some of the theoretical concepts explored in other presentations, Darvill concluded that simulations are no substitute for what you can see on the ground.

Unfortunately, there was little time for questions or discussion but the overall mix of presentations did try and fulfil the brief set by the session title, though inevitably some were more successful than others. A couple of the case studies were more reminiscent of presentations at traditional archaeoastronomy conferences with the same questions, the same methodology and the same orientations being sought, albeit at different sites. An exception here was William Romain’s talk, which fully explored the ethnographic background at Cahokia, to provide additional corroboration for his findings. For me, the theoretical papers were more interesting because they showed how skyscape archaeology is evolving through the benefit of multidisciplinary ideas which are having an impact in driving forward new approaches. For example, Daniel Brown expanded his phenomenological work on skyscape and landscape to explore contemporary skyscape experiences. The particular theoretical highlights included Fabio Silva’s exposition of the ontological turn, followed by Thomas Legendre’s explanation of Object-Oriented Ontology, both of which were inspiring. Special mention must also be made of Marc Türler’s interesting interpretation of rock art, the variety and pervasiveness of which is generally seen as a specialised field outside archaeoastronomy. In the gap between the original skyscapes sessions at TAG and this one, the earlier foreshadowings seem to have turned into seismic shifts, which, while they may be challenging, bode well for the future.

References


© 2022 EQUINOX PUBLISHING LTD

