Liz Henty, *Exploring Archaeoastronomy: A History of Its Relationship with Archaeology and Esotericism*


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There are two purposes to this book, both of which it admirably achieves. One is to provide a complete history of what has become known as “archaeoastronomy”, meaning studies of the connections of ancient monuments with the sky, and above all their apparent alignments on heavenly bodies. What gives the result added value (and length) is its interest in the changing relationships of this enterprise with both professional archaeology and with esoteric interests and beliefs outside of mainstream scholarship and usually at variance with it. The other purpose is to provide a passionate defence of the value of studying monuments in connection with the sky, in the face of a long tradition of neglect or disapproval on the part of archaeologists.

The story told gets a lot more detailed for the late twentieth century, but this is purely a result of more material, and earlier periods are covered as thoroughly as possible. The first point it makes is that both archaeology and archaeoastronomy have their beginnings in the same eighteenth-century antiquarians, such as William Stukeley and John Wood, who were interested in all aspects of ancient structures including their lunar and solar alignments and a possible standard unit of measurement for their construction. This breadth of vision continued for about a hundred years – for example Edward Duke proposed the idea of a prehistoric planetarium in 1846 – but investigations linked to astronomy languished in the late nineteenth century even as excavation surged ahead and began to define archaeology as a discipline. A new era of alignment investigation was inaugurated in the 1890s by the leading astronomer Sir Norman Lockyer, who proceeded over the following three decades to propose a new scientific methodology for research. This yielded results which supposed a skilled knowledge of astronomy among the prehistoric British. He was accompanied and followed by other investigators, notably A. L. Lewis and Boyd Somerville, and a dialogue was commenced with archaeology. It was however an
uneasy and sometimes rancorous one, the astronomers blaming archaeologists for not collecting precise astronomical data, and having their own findings questioned in turn.

Between 1930 and 1960 archaeology consolidated its position as an academic discipline with fully professional practitioners. One of the findings of this book is that archaeoastronomy did not die out in this period, as has often been supposed, but was continued on a smaller scale by independent researchers. It was during these years, moreover, that a third grouping began to crystallise out of that same antiquarian milieu that had produced the other two. This consisted of proponents of ideas concerning prehistoric monuments which lay outside the scholarly mainstreams of both archaeology and science. The main early manifestation of these consisted of Alfred Watkins’ concept of leys, alleged straight alignments connecting different monuments across the landscape. The notion that prehistoric structures lay on straight lines had been proposed by Duke, and again by local scholars, but Watkins greatly extended it and gave it a popular constituency. In a pattern which was regularly to be reproduced henceforth, archaeologists rejected it almost completely, but archaeoastronomers treated it with some respect, partly because Watkins had been influenced by Lockyer and Somerville and accorded the same respect to astronomers.

The 1960s and 1970s were the great age of “scientific” archaeology, and also saw new and powerful initiatives by archaeoastronomers and a very large new public for their works. Those initiatives commenced with the series of publications by Gerald Hawkins culminating in his bestseller *Stonehenge Decoded* (1965), which employed the new computer technology to prove that Stonehenge had been a prehistoric computer, with many solar and lunar alignments. The controversy over this brought in an astronomer as distinguished as Lockyer, Sir Fred Hoyle, and unsettled, rather than convinced, archaeologists. It was then overtaken in the later 1960s by the tremendous challenge mounted to the established view of prehistory by Alexander Thom, the Oxford professor of engineering who drew on Lewis, Somerville and some other earlier researchers and embellished their ideas with greater accuracy and a much larger amount of source material. He believed Neolithic people to have been capable of complex geometrical designs, a standard unit of measurement and common calendar, and extensive astronomical observations, all of which they embedded in their monuments. Liz Henty is fair in showing both the care and industry which Thom took over his observations and the flaws in his reasoning (reproduced by his followers): the inaccuracy of his dating system for monuments, his failure to show why the prehistoric British would have needed a calendar at all and (above all) his projection of a modern model of a scientific elite onto the remote past.

Here her project of showing the relationships between archaeoastronomy, archaeology and forms of fringe spirituality and speculative history and prehistory is especially interesting. She consistently criticises archaeologists for defensiveness and narrowness of vision, from their emergence as a profession, and for their hostile and dismissive treatment of groups which might be taken to represent alternative foci of authority concerning the prehistoric past. This makes a fit with similar observations made previously by Adam Stout and the present reviewer (Stout 2006; Hutton 2013). Moreover, she has a strong point to offer when asking why, if archaeologists have regularly employed or allied with
specialists in sciences and technologies in which they themselves have had no expertise, such as radiocarbon dating and the study of bones, they have not done the same with astronomers and mathematicians. Her answer is also compelling: that unlike these other experts, scientists like Lockyer and Thom offered a view of prehistory that seemed incompatible with that which archaeology had provided. She is also correct in identifying the manner in which Thom was made into a hero, and his work appropriated, by a new manifestation of avant-garde spirituality, the “Earth mysteries movement”. In the books of its founder, John Michell, Watkins’ theory of leys was blended with sacred numerology and Chinese spiritual geometry to portray a prehistoric religion of tremendous wisdom into which Thom’s astronomer priests could readily be fitted.

Henty is also correct that this lionisation by wholly unacademic and even antiacademic thinkers served to reinforce suspicion of Thom’s ideas among archaeologists. She consistently tends, however, to emphasise the gap between the “Earth mysteries” and “proper” archaeoastronomy in each period, and while the core ideas were very different, the two groups blended at the fringes (as did archaeology and archaeoastronomy) and may have encouraged each other slightly more than is allowed for in her book. This is a point over which she engages directly with me, contesting my suggestion that Thom took his eight-festival prehistoric calendar from modern Paganism and his interest in terrestrial alignments from ley hunters. She argues instead that he gained both from the earlier antiquarian and archaeoastronomical tradition on which Pagans and Earth mystics also drew. In the matter of alignments, I am prepared to accept some possibility of this, but I knew the people at the time and saw how readily friends and followers of Thom and Michell mixed, talked and transmitted ideas back. In the case of festivals, the components of the system existed separately in the work of earlier writers, and it was only brought together as an entity by Pagans in the 1950s.

At this point the British history is suspended to allow a much needed and very helpful digression to examine the parallel history of archaeoastronomy in the Americas. This was clearly inspired by the earlier British research, but from its start possessed strengths that the British equivalent lacked, as it was bound up with studies of native civilisations for which historical records survived and ethnographies of other indigenous peoples whose testimonies were recorded by researchers. As such, it was much less speculative and much better grounded in supporting evidence and was rapidly incorporated into academic institutions. It has flagged in North America in recent years but burgeoned in Latin America. The very term “archaeoastronomy”, preferred by practitioners, was coined by a British follower of Thom in 1971 but popularised by American adoption.

Resuming its British narrative, the book now shows how some archaeologists were sufficiently impressed by Thom’s challenge to draw together with archaeoastronomers in the 1970s and early 1980s in a series of collaborations. It also shows that most archaeologists did not engage and that the two fields then diverged again, Thom’s “megalithic science” turning back into a largely autonomous and self-referential field. This largely consisted of the work of a set of young Cambridge astronomers inspired by Thom, of whom Clive Ruggles became the most prominent. He scrapped geometry, metrology, dating and the calendar, and the challenge to archaeology, and made alignments less
precise and focused the study of them on related groups of monuments. This shift allowed some academic presence, with two universities respectively running a course and a unit in archaeoastronomy by the 1990s. Few archaeologists, however, noticed, and the great theoretical shift of their discipline during that decade, to postprocessual and cognitive forms which looked to symbolism and ritual rather than the models offered by social science, left the study of the sky shut out as much as before.

The book now makes a further digression, to survey how archaeoastronomy in Continental Europe had different trajectories in different countries. A tendency throughout the whole work to turn discussions into lists of authors and publications is especially notable here, but the value of the exercise as primary research extenuates the density of the result. Most worthy of mention is the retired British astronomer Michael Hoskin, who pioneered work on alignments of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites in the Mediterranean. Most nations have produced some initiatives in the field, though Germany is notably underrepresented. Continental developments are especially significant for generating the term and concept of “cultural astronomy” to signify the integration of landscape and culture with the observation of the sky, and for producing the most notable international body for archaeoastronomers, the Société Européenne pour l’Astronomie dans la Culture.

The final chapter, on recent developments, was I confess a personal eye-opener, by showing what an immense amount has been going on. The output on archaeoastronomy since 2000 has equalled that of the whole twentieth century, and since 2010 it has been reactivating itself with new theories, such as the social construction of the sky and the need to study monuments in particular districts over long spans of time. Henty also plausibly claims that this has been achieved as an international effort and without dominating figures, although Fabio Silva seems to be present in many of the initiatives. “Skyscape archaeology” is now the preferred term, with the ambition of studying the sky as a whole and integrating it with the landscape. This has a regular slot in the main annual conference of British archaeologists, and some distinguished figures among them, such as Jan Harding, have incorporated it into their projects. The journal in which this review appears was founded in 2015 to get more of archaeologists interested; and yet most are still not, and the field remains marginal to mainstream archaeology.

This book is intended address this situation, and seems to be, wisely, targeted mostly at archaeoastronomers on the assumption that they rather than other groups are going to read it. It notes that archaeologists have tended to take the initiative to make collaborations when they have occurred, while archaeoastronomers have tended to stay in their own communities. Largely as a result, they still have little presence in universities and specialist journals, and face a long tradition of scepticism from the mainstream, accentuated by their perceived association with ley hunters and Earth mysteries. Moreover, historically – as the book has shown – they have almost always been out of step with developments in archaeology at each stage. Henty concludes with a call for them to knock on archaeologists’ doors to secure a place as a subset within their discipline, as the study of “the impact of astronomy on culture”. She recommends especially collaborations over particular sites, which certainly seems sensible, and notes correctly that the relationship between the two groups, if still distant, is no longer adversarial, and that both now have some insti-
tutional basis. At the same time, she recognises that those studying ancient skyscapes have a debilitating lack of consensus over methods and theory and a breadth of different interests, which weakens cohesion. All this is true. The sympathies of the present reviewer are clearly engaged on her side, and high praise is invited here for a book that significantly increases our knowledge as well as seeks to redefine the disciplinary landscape. The fact that the spell check of my computer does not recognise “archaeoastronomy”, however, makes for a depressing starting point.

References