When Worlds Collide

Timothy Darvill

Bournemouth University, UK
tdarvill@bournemouth.ac.uk

Archaeology, like every other "ology" or field of study, has porous mutable boundaries and an ever-changing set of overlapping interests. The scope of the field at any one time, and consequently its representation in university teaching, research and practice programmes, is closely tied to changing interests, shifting theoretical stances and the politics of higher education. Archaeology is unusual as an academic discipline in also having a long-standing, strong and growing relationship with wider societal concerns clearly articulated through ancient monuments legislation and its inclusion in spatial planning, environmental assessment, place making, the creation of social identities and many other areas as well. To speak of an "academy" in archaeology as some sort of controlled intellectual space or singular community of practice is anachronistic. The great strengths of the discipline include its diversity, openness, breadth of interests in time and space and strong engagement with other fields. No area of archaeology exists in isolation; it is a series of overlapping interests where worlds collide.

Archaeoastronomy is the offspring of one of those overlaps with a related field whose ancestry and core ways of thinking were grounded in positivism. It emerged at an inopportune time when both archaeology and astronomy were developing new ways of thinking and heading off in opposite directions to pastures new. One reason why archaeoastronomy failed to gain the traction and interest that early advocates hoped for is simply that it was out of step with broader disciplinary concerns. The more widely constituted idea of skyscapes came into the world in much the same way as archaeoastronomy, but its ancestry is more overtly grounded in cultural relativism. Within archaeology this is a topical and relevant paradigm, although not one that has much connection to modern astronomy, and into the mix we might also consider the field of palaeoastronomy, the study of the ways that past communities considered and understood the heavenly bodies. These historical perspectives still have a lot to offer.

Taking a particularly UK-based perspective there are a number of points to consider, starting with the fact that no university archaeology department can hope to cover the full breadth of archaeology as an international discipline. Each has to be selective and

JSA 6.2 (2020) 261–264
https://doi.org/10.1558/jsa.19635

ISSN (print) 2055-348X
ISSN (online) 2055-3498

equinoxonline

realistic, and in purely practical terms is likely to reflect the range of interests of those in a particular community. Further, research interests may change through time, and over the course of an academic career may shift considerably. Recruitment to academic posts can be strategic and targeted, but in practical terms tend to focus on broad domains rather than specialist areas. Moreover, the very idea of the university is being challenged by shifting political ideology, the demands of the knowledge economy and the rise of managerialism as a means of governing and running these deep-rooted institutions, trends that as Thomas Docherty (2011) argues create a highly uncertain future.

At undergraduate level in the UK, those tasked with planning the future development of programmes find themselves caught in the jaws of not one but two conflicts. The first concerns whether programmes should be tightly focused on a particular discipline or broadly based, the latter in the American style of liberal arts education. The second relates to divergent views about whether programmes should be academically focused or practice based. Neither are binary options so individual university departments are working to position themselves on the intersecting gradients that these concerns represent. In Britain, two key bodies underpin these endeavours and structure the content and delivery of undergraduate programmes: the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIFA).

The QAA's *Subject Benchmark Statement: Archaeology* is brokered by the agency but written by a committee of archaeologists. First published in 2000, reviewed and revised in 2007, and revised again in 2014 (QAA 2014), this is a living document that reflects changing interests (see Rainbird and Hamilakis 2001, 51–77 for a wider discussion on benchmarking). However, it contains no mention of archaeoastronomy or closely related areas. Why? Because no representations were made to the benchmark panel either from academic institutions or from professional groups suggesting that these were relevant fields of interest. The benchmark panel does not prescribe the scope of the discipline; rather, it attempts to capture trends and reflect what is going on at grass-roots level. Of course, not being explicitly mentioned does not exclude coverage, but its presence would give recognition, leverage and help with quality assurance issues when programmes are validated and reviewed.

More recent is CIFA's accreditation initiative for undergraduate archaeology degree programmes (CIFA 2019), which has seen the first wave of programmes awarded accredited status in spring 2020 (CIFA 2020). Accreditation is very much skills-based, and while not directly relevant to specialist sub-discipline areas such as skyscape archaeology, by prescribing some programme content it has the effect of reducing the amount of space available for other things.

The upshot of curriculum design and delivery practices is that there is little space in most undergraduate programmes for specialist areas. This is compounded by concerns over units or components that are tied to the interests of one specific individual, as these, in management speak, represent critical points of failure that need to be avoided or minimised.

At taught postgraduate level there is more flexibility and freedom. Programmes tend to be specialist in nature, but for that very reason tend to recruit small cohorts. This is

attractive from an intellectual and academic sense, but frowned upon from the perspective of educational economics by university managers.

The research undertaken within UK universities is governed in large measure by academic freedom, which allows individual scholars or working groups to pursue topics they believe to be of interest and value. Increasingly, however, funding bodies operate within strategic frameworks and many institutions use similar devices to target their investments and support (and commensurately, disinvestment). The periodic Research Excellence Framework assesses the quality and impact of published research outputs and tries to capture the scale and scope of endeavour, and the current guidelines for its panels (REF 2019), whose next assessment exercise will take place next year, make no mention of archaeoastronomy, palaeoastronomy or skyscape archaeology as recognised subdiscipline areas either in archaeology (Unit 15) or in astronomy, which is treated as a part of physics (UoA9). Why? Because no representations seem to have been made when the scoping work was carried out. Again, the lists are not prescriptive and not being there does not stop ongoing research, but being included aids recognition of work in the field and can help position it when managers ask "which unit of assessment will review your work?".

Professional practice is the third strand in today's academic firmament, and one that is becoming more prominent as government policy seeks stronger connections between universities and business. Situating skyscape studies in this arena is not easy, but there are obvious openings, for example through connections to the heritage industry. As a volume edited by Clive Ruggles has shown, the World Heritage List includes many sites whose inscription includes reference to their astronomical significance to past societies (Ruggles 2017). Stonehenge in Wiltshire is but one example amongst many. In commercial archaeology there is undoubtedly interest in exploring skyscapes alongside landscapes and seascapes as relevant dimensions for the understanding and interpretation of what is found. Bucklebury, Berkshire, provides an example where excavations by Cotswold Archaeology suggest that the layout of building and fences at an early ironworking site referenced lunar events in the night sky that could somehow enrich the *chaîne opératoire* by adding a symbolic dimension to the activities of these early blacksmiths (Collard *et al*. 2006, 403, 416).

So where does this all leave us? Three things stand as strands in a route map for the future. In first place is the need to build confidence in what we have to offer. Aligning endeavour with current theoretical approaches opens up opportunities for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary work. Cultural relativism and cosmological perspectivism offer bold and relevant approaches to exploring people's relationships with the sky, and the idea of "skyscapes" provides a handy vehicle. Embracing these theoretical perspectives and the epistemologies that go with them can provide a secure and exciting future for the field. Palaeoastronomy undoubtedly has a continuing role, but archaeoastronomy looks less certain given that astronomy today has quite different interests from the observational focus of fifty years ago.

Second, using that confidence, the subject needs to become more visible and get itself listed in framework documents, strategies, research agendas and benchmarks so that funders and managers can see, recognise and appreciate the role and place of

skyscape archaeology. Contributions to undergraduate programmes and perhaps a small number of postgraduate programmes could result. Creating worthwhile, interesting and high-impact outputs will be essential.

Third, building on enhanced recognition, collaborations and partnerships can be developed within the wider domain of academic archaeology (with landscape and seascape archaeology for example) and with the wider commercial and heritage sectors. No sub-discipline area of archaeology thrives on its own, because that is the nature of the subject. Holistic understandings of human behaviours and relationships need to consider the sky as much as the earth below and this, surely, is our contribution.

References

CIFA [Chartered Institute for Archaeologists], 2019. "How to Apply for Degree Accreditation" [online]. Accessed May 2020. www.archaeologists.net/Degree_Accreditation_information_for_training_providers

CIFA [Chartered Institute for Archaeologists], 2020. "Accredited Degrees" [online]. Accessed May 2020. www.archaeologists.net/Accredited_Degrees

Collard, M., T. Darvill and M. Watts *et al.*, 2006. "Ironworking in the Bronze Age? Evidence from a 10th Century BC Settlement at Hartshill Copse, Upper Bucklebury, West Berkshire". *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 72: 367–422. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0079497X0000089X

Doherty, T., 2011. *For the University: Democracy and the Future of the Institution*. London: Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781849666336

QAA [Quality Assurance Agency], 2014. *Subject Benchmark: Archaeology*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency. [online] Accessed May 2020. www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/subject-benchmark-statements/sbs-archaeology-14.pdf

Rainbird, P. and Y. Hamilakis, eds, 2001. *Interrogating Pedagogies: Archaeology in Higher Education*. Lampeter Workshop in Archaeology 3; British Archaeological Reports, International Series 984. Oxford: Archaeopress. https://doi.org/10.30861/9781841712406

REF [Research Excellence Framework], 2019. "Panel Criteria and Working Methods" [online]. Accessed May 2020. https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1084/ref-2019_02-panel-criteria-and-working-methods.pdf

Ruggles, C. L. M., ed., 2017. *Heritage Sites of Astronomy and Archaeoastronomy in the Context of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention*. Thematic Study 2. Bognor Regis and Paris: Ocarina Books and ICOMOS [online]. Accessed May 2020. https://www3.astronomicalheritage.net/_downloads/ocarinabooks.com/heritage-of-astronomy_thematic-study_2ndedition.pdf