

CONFERENCE REVIEW

Review of the 35th Annual Conference of the Theoretical Archaeology Group, TAG 2013

Liz Henty*

The Theoretical Archaeology Group held its 35th annual conference at Bournemouth. Traditionally this conference takes place at the end of December, a week before Christmas and this gives an end of term, festive feeling to the otherwise serious academic content. The holiday atmosphere was heightened by the title TAG-on-Sea, appropriate enough for a famous seaside resort. The seaside theme was represented in the programme by sessions on marine archaeology and land-, sea-, and skylscapes, but overridingly the content was a platform for dispersing ideas through presentations of completed work and discussions of theoretical and methodological issues. A full programme was offered over two and a half days with five simultaneous sessions at any one time.

On Monday afternoon I presented a paper along with nine other archaeoastronomers in the session entitled 'Land, Sea and Sky: a '3-scape' Approach to Archaeology'. The premise here is that the macrocosm of land, sea and sky are reflected in the microcosm of any coastal society and this was ably demonstrated by Dan Brown (Nottingham Trent). Tore Lomsdalen and Olwyn Pritchard (Trinity Saint David) explored this concept via the Maltese megalithic temples and the Welsh dolmens. Archaeoastronomy has moved a

long way since Alexander Thom's megalithic science and precision alignments. Now it shows an increasing acceptance that astro-nomic orientations must fit the archaeology of the site and Liz Henty, Pamela Armstrong (Trinity Saint David) and Fabio Silva (University College London) showed fresh insights into the ways the methodologies of archaeology and archaeoastronomy can be combined through their respective work on the Recumbent Stone Circles of Scotland, the Cotswold long barrows, and the Neolithic dolmens of Iberia. Lionel Sims, anthropologist and archaeoastronomer, showed how a multi-disciplinary approach could be effective at Stonehenge. In conversation, Sims said that an attack was made on archaeoastronomy at the plenary session of TAG 2005 at Sheffield, yet not only were archaeoastronomers well-received at TAG 2012 in Liverpool in a session entitled 'The Role and Importance of the Sky in Archaeology' organised by Silva, but were welcomed back to Bournemouth. They showed that archaeoastronomers now embrace the material culture of archaeology and that archaeologists are increasingly embracing the sky as another 'scape'.

A rainy Tuesday morning dawned and more delegates arrived and more left. A lasting visual image of TAG is that it is populated by bearers of small wheeled suitcases. This says something more profound about the discipline of archaeology as it finds itself today. There are so many different fields, specialisations and sub-disciplines that its voice

* PhD Research Student, Trinity Saint David,
University of Wales
lizhenty@f2s.com

is that of a choir, mainly but not altogether harmonious. Happily, it was the students who, by making up about half of the 485 visitors, attended in large numbers a range of different sessions throughout the three days; though doubtless they may already be on the road to specialisation. Barely old enough to be 'Thatcher's children' they would have been enlightened by the day-long session 'Archaeologies of Margaret Thatcher' which had much to say about the whole thorny issue of who owns the past by showing how closely the archaeological discipline is moulded and shaped for political ends.

Excavation of bodies and interpretation of funerary rights has long been the province of archaeologists and forensic anthropologists, but the session entitled 'Theory Starts in the Grave' incorporated the relatively recent science of osteobiography to show that the past can be more humanised than ever before. The image of three Anglo-Saxon individual skeletons placed with their limbs interlocked informs the emotional response of the funeral participants, according to Duncan Sayer (University of Central Lancaster). It was argued by Martin Smith (Bournemouth) that the human body is a sort of artefact in itself and without sufficient study important aspects of funerary treatment may be missed. Beyond Bayesian methodology and radiocarbon dating, phenomenology underlies much new archaeological practice.

This psychological theme was extensively scrutinised in the session 'The Material Dimensions of Cognition'. Here it was suggested that archaeology, whilst becoming increasingly methodological and scientific, has perhaps lost a narrative along the way; the type of narrative employed by Burl when he peopled the stone circles with merry dancers. We have the bones, we have the dates, we have the method of burial but somewhere, like our ancestral skeletons, archaeology has lost the flesh. We may know the provenance and date of a polished stone axe but the mental constructs behind the craft, ideology and symbolism can only be glimpsed

through the lens of cognitive archaeology. These artefacts too, inert when recovered, are moving parts of a flow in which, Norrmark (Gothenburg) argued, time and space emerge in objects. Cognitive archaeologists, whilst drawing on approaches from the fields of semiotics and psychology, recognise the input of their own cognitive behaviour - so it requires reflexive awareness. The following discussion was surprisingly lively given the weightiness of the subject.

Wednesday was the last full day of the conference and there was a day-long session entitled '20 Years of Taskscapes: From Temporalities to Ceramiscenes'. The term 'taskscapes' was coined by Tim Ingold in 1993, to indicate a socially constructed space of human activity in the course of their everyday actions. The session addressed the importance of taskscapes in archaeology and how they can be used to enhance the study of cultural landscapes as well as looking at the related development of taskscape analysis in heritage, landscape and material studies in the last twenty years. Fittingly the session started with Tim Ingold's (Aberdeen) own thoughts on taskscape and how its use has developed. Andrew Fleming (Leicester) stressed the importance of the late Mick Aston who not only introduced the term of landscape archaeology but became a critic of its postmodern dehumanisation. To this end, the study of people-centred taskscapes which humanise the landscape is a desirable objective. Adam Lodoen (Bournemouth) situated the concept of taskscape in a general enquiry about why little has been done with the huge amounts of data gathered by archaeologists. The archaeological record contains hundreds of different types of artefacts and possible monuments, and the only way to manage the data statistically is to reduce the number of categories. He offered two possibilities, that of categorisation by signature, a sort of archaeological footprint found amongst diverse sites or that of the use of taskscape where an array of related activities can be interpreted. Clearly the latter approach is

phenomenological whereas the former is data-driven. In Lodoen's words it is functional graphic perception versus taxonomic conceptual thinking.

Various interpretations could be derived under the umbrella term *taskscape*. These included Astrid Nyland's (Oslo) empirical study of raw material procurement, Bob Clarke's (Exeter) Cold War Britain's secret *taskscape*s and the cognitive *taskscape* experienced by undergraduates Tom Gardner, Alex Wood and Alex Westra (Edinburgh) whilst analysing the relationship between a small stone circle and the landscape. It seems that the macrocosmic tree of theory is made up of not just a solid trunk but of spreading roots and thick veins of branches from which sprout many microcosmic twigs: an impression gained not from just this session but throughout the different sessions.

As TAG is eponymously theoretical, perhaps some insight into the discipline of archaeology can be drawn from its sessions and speakers. Again it appears that archaeology is an umbrella term and under its aegis spring multivariuous and multivalent sub-disciplines. Theories derive and continue in evolved form from all its incarnations such as the antiquarianism of the Three Age System, Christopher Hawkes' Ladder of Inference, New Archaeology, processualism, functionalism, reductionism and post-processualism. Radiocarbon dating may have revolutionised our timing of the past but it did not invalidate the basic findings of excavations or stratification studies. Vestiges of old theory and results thread through current research and that is no bad thing as their critiques add to current theory and keep the methodological debate alive. Contemporaneously, as can be inferred from the conference programme, archaeology draws

on many disciplines across both science and the humanities. Important theory has been filtered from psychology, anthropology, ethnohistory and archaeoastronomy to name but a few. The title of the anthropology session, 'Archaeology and Anthropology: Squabbling siblings, star-crossed lovers or bitter enemies?' addressed this subtle change which has caused archaeology to branch out. It seems that there is mutual benefit from this alliance. Given the past acrimonious debate between archaeology and archaeoastronomy, the same question could have been asked of the relationship between these two. However, at TAG at least, archaeoastronomy has dropped its concerns with megalithic science, has adopted the 'scape' word, and now marries the known archaeology to the astronomy. Mirroring landscape archaeology, it is now moving towards becoming 'skyscape archaeology'.

So, here at TAG 2013, gone is the archaeological orthodoxy which characterised most of the twentieth century, gone are the grand narratives of modernism and gone too, dare I say it, the discipline of archaeology. With apologies to Barthes ([1957]2009) whose writings suggested my term, archaeology is replaced by 'archaeologies', an eclectic mix of sub-disciplines using whatever is useful from other disciplines to create an intuitive far-reaching inter-disciplinary collaboration, informed by past theory and methodological rules but unfettered by them.

References

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