

A Ray of Theoretical Sunshine

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Over two decades ago, Keith Kintigh (1992) proffered an opinion that archaeoastronomy was largely irrelevant to contemporary archaeological theory. Anthony Aveni (1992) rebuffed Kintigh but, in so doing, he too acknowledged that archaeoastronomers needed to “escalate their work to address culturally substantive questions” (Aveni 1992, 4). It seems that both researchers put the onus on archaeoastronomy. Things have changed since then: archaeology itself is now theorising the sky.

Actually, for all intents and purposes, the Kintigh–Aveni exchange was eclipsed, figuratively speaking, seven years after 1992 by Anna Sofaer’s superb documentary film *The Mystery of Chaco Canyon* (1999). Throughout the 2000s, I featured that film in my courses on North American and global archaeology at the University of Illinois, partly because it tackles the big questions surrounding the greater Southwest’s premier Puebloan archaeological complex, partly because it parallels theoretical developments in archaeology proper and partly because Sofaer’s findings resonate with my own in the Mississippi Valley (Pauketat 2013). Even if some details of her case for multiple celestial alignments of Chacoan rock art, masonry constructions and regional landscape might be disputed or even ultimately disproven, Sofaer’s (2008) approach has been inspirational in its illustration of astronomy’s relevance to Native American identity and history. In the film, Acoma, Hopi, Laguna, Santa Clara and Zuni researchers and leaders, including Phil Tuwaletstiwa, Paul Pino, Edmund Ladd, Connie Garcia, David Warren and Petuuche Gilbert, explain *how* this place still centres the lives of its descendants (see also Kuwanwisiwma 2004; Naranjo 2008). Chaco, it seems, mediates the rhythms of this world by virtue of its multi-layered and multidimensional connections to the Sun, Moon, rocks, plants, ancestors and more. In some sense, Chaco *is* history, identity, society and meaning, at least as one engages with *or is engaged by* Chaco (Van Dyke 2007). The film makes the latter, highly theoretical point clear. Places have qualities that afford them power over people’s movements, activities and histories (Basso 1996; Bradley 2000; Bowser and Nieves Zedeño 2009). One of those qualities may be the (sometimes coincidental) alignment with other moving bodies in the sky (Pauketat 2013).

Chaco bares such qualities for us all to see and feel, with profound implications for global, comparative interrogations of the relationships between cultural identity, pilgrimage, religion, complexity, civilisation and so forth (Pauketat and Meskell 2010). Of course, those implications may not have been so obvious in 1992, owing to the state of archaeological theory at the time. Suffice it to say that, while “post-processual” themes of cultural meaning and ideology had filtered into Americanist archaeologies 20-plus years ago, those themes had not yet been widely conceived in the material and experiential terms that they would by the late 1990s (Ashmore and Knapp 1999). Archaeology at the time – especially in North America – was still obsessed with recognising the correlates of human organisations and then explaining the evolution of those bodies by inferring their presumed functions (Pauketat 2007). Great logical leaps were involved in making such organisational inferences, certainly as many as are made in most archaeoastronomical arguments. But archaeologists, locked into the processual paradigm of the time, did not recognise their own leaps, yet found astronomical inferences questionable.

This state of affairs still reigns for many practising archaeologists. Likewise, many archaeoastronomers think little beyond their trigonometric calculations. And so, aspects of the Kintigh–Aveni exchange resonate even today. However, there is a ray of theoretical sunshine that is reinvigorating the study of human–celestial relationships. It is today’s less anthropocentric or post-humanist approaches to the past which recognise the mediating role of materials, substances, things, places, people *and celestial phenomena* in social relations and history, human and otherwise (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Ingold 2011, 2012). These approaches go, or at least should go, beyond merely pinpointing the mediators. Mediation itself is open to change. That is, people might be humanised or dehumanised and persons might be more or less individuated or distributed as they relate to the dynamic fields of matter, being and experience within which they realise their identity and history. Such fields are always in flux, depending on *where* and *how* some set of relations is mediated – which is to say, related to a wider fluid array of moving parts. The sky is full of moving parts. Alignment to them is a form of mediation.

Before Chaco Canyon became the Puebloan complex we see today, it mediated human and non-human relations through its rocks, cliffs and valley floor, the latter, it turns out, being naturally pre-aligned to lunar standstills (Sofaer 2008). Thus, human agency and history was contingent to some important extent on that of the valley and the Moon, which is why alignments of buildings here, or anywhere, matter (Ashmore 2007). They empower the human constructions; they shape history. The point is not restricted to astronomy: if you live with or alongside mountains or the ocean and allow yourself to become aligned by or with them, then your sense of self and place in the world will be different from those who do not. The same applies to the amount of sunlight you absorb or the levels of caffeine, alcohol or nicotine you might ingest on a routine basis. All such things have potential effects that mediate your life.

In short, your *position* within a larger experiential web has historical implications and the sky is a significant part of that web, at least for many people in the past. The question remains, of course, as to the extent of its power over our lives, which is why we need better and larger-scale archaeoastronomical studies alongside, incidentally, research

into the effects of the celestial realm on people. Might your sense of self and community be altered by the ways in which and the frequency with which you stargaze, much the way that the Pawnee – out on the treeless Central Plains – thought of themselves as the people of the stars (Fletcher 1902)? If so, shouldn't we be concerned with the extent to which a group's relations with others would be affected, including broader social if not geopolitical relationships?

The point at hand now, as opposed to 1992, would seem to be that all relations between and among people, places, things, substances and phenomena – including human–celestial relations – are not meaningless reflections of the processes of history: they *are* the processes of history. And just because many people today are disconnected from the sky does not mean that people of the past were or that we can dismiss the historical significance of positioning and affect as it concerns relational configurations of people and cosmic entities or celestial phenomena. Rather, the variable degree to which, and the ways *in* which, the movements or practices of people parallel the Sun, Moon, planets, stars etc. is the degree to which we might expect divergent social histories. Given this, why would any researcher today exclude the effects of the sky on human experience?

To punctuate that question, let us conclude by looking back one last time at the big historical patterns of the Puebloan Southwest. From about 860 AD to 1140 AD, and then again from 1140 AD to the late 1200s AD or so, the Chacoans and their descendants were consummate skywatchers (Malville 2006). They had found a way, to quote Phil Tuwaletstiwa (in Sofaer 1999), of replicating the “order of things up there” down here on earth. These were powerful people with an expansive, outward-looking vision, according to Elizabeth Newsome and Kelley Hays-Gilpin (2011). That vision, or ontology, played out as distinctly integrative forms of community and ethnicity across great stretches of the Southwest. Chaco was the materiality of that vision as it came to be. But, interestingly, that expansive view of the world changed near the end of the thirteenth century AD, for reasons thoroughly entangled in a period of great migration and upheaval. When Puebloan peoples re-emerged in the Pueblo-IV period, their astronomical practices had contracted and the people, though settled in ever more densely populated towns, were nevertheless insular and locally bounded. Pueblo history was altered as a consequence.

Of course, the histories of all people correlate with particular ways of relating to the heavens (Krupp 1997). We have just been waiting for the ray of theoretical sunshine that will allow us to understand how and why. Contrary to the upshot of the Kintigh–Aveni exchange in 1992, the burden of theorising human-celestial relations was never to be carried by archaeoastronomers. Archaeoastronomy is merely a set of methods. We have been waiting for archaeological theories that might take advantage of those tools. I think that the theoretical stars are now in alignment.

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