



Book Reviews

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DARKNESS EDS ROBERT HENSEY AND MARION DOWD

Oxbow Books, 2016. 144pp, 33 figs, 15 col and B&W pls, 5 tables. ISBN 978-1-78570-191-7, pb, £32

The book derives from a conference that took place at the Institute of Technology, Sligo in October 2012. It is the simplicity, the magnitude, of the research question that this volume poses that strikes home: how did past humans relate to and interact with darkness? Simple, because in our contemporary neon-obsessed 24/7 culture darkness is effectively banished to the edges of our cultural perceptions. Magnitude, because once we realise that darkness affected humans in the past we understand what a fundamental role it must have played.

Particular highlights include Charlotte Damm's evocative discussion of life in the Arctic North which provides an understanding of how indigenous cultures in these regions experienced, and adapted to, the winter months. Marion Dowd's discussion of Late Bronze Age cave deposition at Glencurran is well argued. She explores the hoard deposit and human bone associated with the cave, and importantly contrasts the experience of its location (in a cramped and dark location within the cave) with the open-air and public experience of other Bronze Age ritual activities, such as the use of stone circles. She convincingly identifies a ritual practice associated with solitude from her analysis of the archaeological materials. After darkness comes light, and Richard Bradley's contribution offers a rich analysis of the changing orientations of a suite of Scottish megalithic monuments, including Balnuaran of Clava and Croftmoraig. He notes how the orientations of houses and monuments were intended to relate to particular events over the day, including the rising and setting of the sun. He subtly draws attention to the way in which the orientations of contemporary prehistoric houses and monuments draw attention to either contrasts (the rising and setting of the sun) or similarities. Paul Pettitt reprises some of his earlier work on Palaeolithic art in cave settings and discusses the important observation that darkness is an important constituent of the cave art phenomenon; art is produced during the exploration of the darkest depths of the cave. Pettitt displays constraint in his interpretation, simply observing how darkness was an important component of experience, and considering how it may have affected the placement of Palaeolithic art in caves. Robin Skeates' offers a parallel discussion to Pettitt's, discussing the subtle shifts in darkness and light associated with depositional activity in Italian prehistoric cave contexts.

Overall, this is an excellent book. Irish prehistorians have produced some stunning research over the past few years (witness recent monographs by both of the editors, the work of Jessica Smyth on early Neolithic houses, and the run of excellent volumes produced by Irish commercial archaeology units). This book confirms the excellence of contemporary Irish archaeological research. Though the edited volume contains contributions from a wide variety of authors of different nationalities it is the lessons that Irish archaeology and early history can teach us that shines out from this book.

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Review submitted: November 2016