The archaeology of darkness

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backgrounds and location at the King’s College London department of theology and religious studies.

While there are clearly common themes underpinning the volume, the terminology that links them is vague. There is talk of London as a ‘sacred city’ or ‘holy city’, but what does this mean? ‘Religion’ is repeatedly presented as something innate and *sui generis*, which is not the conclusion of contemporary scholarship. The focus on monotheistic belief – to be expected, when so many contributions are theologically oriented – foregrounds Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism to the near-total omission of Hinduism, Buddhism, or modern Paganism.

With its brief but mostly well-referenced chapters, this book seems aimed not at specialists in each subject but at a broader readership who may wish to pursue a given topic in further depth. It is a taster volume, one designed to introduce historians of medieval Christianity to contemporary architecture, and vice versa. In this, it is a success. A lifelong Londoner myself, I still found out about buildings and artworks with which I was unfamiliar. Through its emphasis on one city, it helps pull together disparate ideas and approaches within a single framework, which makes for an enjoyable read. Ultimately, this is a volume of particular interest to those who know and love London.

**References**


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Darkness: do we ever truly experience this in our modern world? The glow of electric lighting is often just the flick of a switch away. Yet for much of the past, darkness would have been a governing force: regulating the rhythms of life, determining the timing and nature of activities, and influencing the character of rituals. In seeking to understand the human experience of the past, we must therefore consider this aspect of their world.

Dowd and Hensey’s book provides an excellent starting-point for exploring this neglected element of the past. The edited volume of papers is the output from a conference titled *Into the Earth: The Archaeology of Darkness*, which was held at the Institute of Technology Sligo in October 2012. It complements Dowd’s (2015) work on *The Archaeology of Caves in Ireland*, which was published after the conference but
before this book. Papers cover a range of periods from the Upper Palaeolithic through to the present. Several disciplines were brought together to stimulate the generation of ideas, and contributors shared their own experiences of visiting the sites.

The binary relationship between light and dark is a key theme. Darkness is often defined as the absence of light, although they can more usefully be considered as endpoints on a spectrum. The transition or liminal state between light and dark receives attention in several papers, whether defined by the nature of the site (for example, in a cave) or by the passing of time (such as twilight). To go beyond the liminal zone is fraught with danger, and several contributors believe ritual provides the most compelling motivation for this. Whitehouse uses anthropological work and personal experience to argue that the journey past the liminal zone in prehistoric Italy worked symbolically and metaphorically in rites of passage. Although this is an interesting interpretation, the brief summary of evidence is not enough to verify the underlying assumption that the caves were primarily used for ritual.

Hamilton and Richards use ethnographic evidence to link darkness and light to the cosmology of Easter Island (Rapa Nui), where we find dualities of female/male and earth/sky and significance is placed on the journey through the liminal zone. The symbolic movement from the exterior light into the darkness of a hare paenga (canoe-shaped house) was transformed into a physical experience by the positioning of sacred carvings, by the enforced adoption of a prone position to gain entry, and by the paving of the entrance area with poro (rounded beach pebbles). This is the only contribution to come from beyond Europe. The boundaries between light and dark were also marked by Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments, which Bradley argues align to the movement of the sun but shifts from sunrise to sunset in the later period. Bradley’s dismissal of practical reasons for site layout may be disputed by some, and the huge time range and detail covered in the paper makes it difficult to follow his argument.

Conversely, practical reasons for journeying into dark areas of caves are explored in James’ fascinating paper on copper mining in the Great Orme in North Wales. Mining is a hazardous activity in any period, so we can safely assume that the rewards during the Bronze Age were great enough to outweigh the risks. Practical and ritual interpretations of finds from the caves are offered, which are compared with objects recovered from post-medieval mining contexts, when written sources are available to fill in some pieces of the puzzle.

James also reflects on the experience of being underground in the past by discussing knockers or coblyn. These post-medieval subterranean spirits were a way of explaining mysterious noises in the mines. Caves remove ambient sounds and also funnel and distort the remaining noise. Additional stress can also be caused when our dependence on sight is reduced and other senses attempt to compensate.

Respected cave researcher Paul Pettitt makes a valuable contribution through his paper on Upper Palaeolithic art. Of particular interest here are findings from his recent project investigating hand prints, a form of cave art that receives less attention in academic literature. He emphasises the importance of another sense – this time, touch – in the creation of images and discusses palpation, the close scrutiny of the cave surface involved in placement decisions. This may be relevant to the development of cave art, as some of the earliest images are composed of hand prints. Pettitt also discusses the use of darkness to complete some cave paintings and to frame others. This suggests a skilled manipulation of darkness to achieve visual effect.

Look up ‘darkness’ in dictionaries, and you will find it associated with the wicked, the evil, the unhappy, and the dismal. These connections are deeply ingrained in our
minds and therefore influence our analysis of the evidence. Damm’s fascinating paper presents an alternative interpretation with her study of the experience of the darker months north of the Arctic Circle. Ethnographic work is used to show that some cultures held positive associations with the darkness, as these months became a holiday period characterised by feasting, games, and visits by relatives, and it was a key time of the year for transmitting local knowledge.

Allmond’s exploration of the twentieth-century Winter Garden at Purdysburn continues this exploration of cultural beliefs about light and darkness. Contemporary literature reveals complex attitudes around their relationship with mental health. Allmond’s exploration of architects’ drawings, contemporary photographs, and expert writings illustrate how this was transposed onto the design and final form of the building. Our cultural attitudes to darkness therefore don’t just define our experience of it, but have in some cases manipulated it and shaped its physical presence.

Several contributions focus on caves, where darkness dominates in an environment that may hardly have changed from when they were occupied in the past. This is so rare elsewhere that this aspect is often overlooked during excavation and post-excavation work. Hensey discusses different types and levels of darkness and suggests the development of a scale, similar to the Munsell colour chart. The existence of a technical scale would encourage excavators to consider this aspect and promote consistency of terminology across sites.

Several contributors use a multidisciplinary approach, with varying results. Carey’s paper on medieval Irish literature is confused and has limited application to the topic. O’Connell’s description of his experiences as a caver reminds us how dangerous it is to venture into the deeper sections of caves, something hard to appreciate when you have only visited sites prepared for public access. His paper also articulates the desire to explore that may have motivated some people to use caves in the past. It is an anomaly within the collection, saying nothing about archaeology and rather too much about modern health and safety mitigations.

The book is at its most valuable when it opens new ways for us to understand past experience, and the more thought-provoking papers will interest specialists while attracting general readers. But it is an incomplete record of the original conference, since papers often refer to a particularly inspiring presentation that was never published. Most sites are explained through ritual and religion, as Cooney emphasises in the concluding comments. This conclusion should be approached with caution; mundane explanations cannot be discounted.

Continuing on a similar theme, Archaeology of the Night complements The Archaeology of Darkness. It appeared 18 months after the earlier book, indicative of a growing interest in overlooked aspects of past lives. This volume focuses on what people did, thought, and felt after the sun went down—a universal daily experience common across all regions and time periods.

This book stems from two symposia held in 2015 and 2016 at Denver and Orlando. Its US origins are reflected in the subjects covered and the geographical focus of the papers. While most research presented concentrates on the Americas, there are several case studies from Europe, Asia, and Africa, and all papers presented at the symposia are included. The editors brought contributions from two different events into a coherent book, structured around five themes that all link back to the world map and chronological chart in the introduction.

So why should two books on the archaeology of the night appear within a few years of each other? What do we gain from examining evidence from the perspective of night-time? Many constraints, difficulties and limitations are attached to this, and there
are pitfalls for the archaeologist to avoid. But there is much that we will miss if we do not adopt this perspective, as the book shows. Chirikure and Moffett's paper exploring nocturnal material culture in Sub-Saharan Africa shows how the knowledge that some work is done only at night – in this instance, iron smelting – can fundamentally alter interpretation of the phasing of archaeological features. This cautionary tale is echoed in Baxter's work using the Junkanoo Festival to understand the lives of enslaved peoples at eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Bahamian plantations. Her work suggests previously unknown social connections and opportunities for movement under slavery. This presents an alternative explanation for ceramic distribution patterns at San Salvador sites, which had been thought to represent activity by the planters. A focus on night-time has brought previously hidden histories out of the dark.

We seldom know if archaeological remains were deposited by day or night, and some papers fall back on other evidence to fill in the gaps. Reed Storey draws on literature to paint a vivid picture of life in ancient Rome after dark, where fears of certain crimes and fire were specific to the night, and laws forced people to do certain things then, such as making deliveries in cities. Wheel ruts and some other archaeological evidence of this activity may survive, but written records are needed for the detail. Other papers use recent case studies to infer what may have happened in societies only known through archaeology. Wright and Garrett use historical New York City to make assumptions about sanitation systems in the Indus Valley civilisation; while this comparison is open to criticism, this is alternative approach that could be used in parallel with other methods.

The theoretical approaches recommended by this book are particularly useful when night-time activities are archaeologically invisible. Several contributors draw on the four-field approach integrating archaeology, linguistics, and physical and cultural anthropology. Though this increases the range of evidence, it also betrays the anthropological background of most contributors. Several papers draw heavily on a recent study by Polly Wiessner (a discussant at the Orlando event) into social interaction round the hearth by the Ju/'hoansi (Wiessner 2014). This overreliance on one source leads to some repetitive conclusions. Though some papers – such as Alt's exploration of night-time, gender, and religion in the Mississippian world – are based on the surviving archaeological evidence, others remain primarily anthropological.

The ecological and circadian changes that occur as day turns to night provide the context within which nocturnal life was lived. An interdisciplinary approach provides the tools to explore this effectively. Among the relevant factors are decreasing temperatures, changes in the behaviour of wildlife, and even biological fluctuations such as drops in human blood pressure. We no longer experience these factors in the same way, because our modern street-lit way of living isolates us from the natural environment. This point is made in the early part of the book and then repeated so often that it begins to feel laboured.

The book is let down by the quality of its illustrations, all in black and white. This is not just an aesthetic fault: several images are reproduced too badly to support the argument put forward. For example, Strong's paper on 'Transformative Aspects of Artificial Light in New Kingdom Egypt' ought to be supported by a scene in the burial chamber of Amunnakht, but it is so difficult to make out any detail in the photograph that Strong's commentary can't be verified. Similarly, McGuire uses a line graph with different shades to indicate approximate hours of darkness in seven sites in the North Atlantic. They're all so grey that it's impossible to understand what he is presenting. Publishers may not be able to use colour, but they should find other ways to convey information.
At around 400 pages, *Archaeology of the Night* is a weighty book of collected conference papers, more traditional in its format than *The Archaeology of Darkness*. It finds an inherent bias towards daytime and its activities by archaeologists, who don’t consider the night and things that are done then, a point made (and made again, and again) by contributors. Archaeology has, of course, considered this part of human life before in general, but particularly through subdisciplines such as household archaeology and archaeoastronomy. However, this book provides a more structured approach to its study and brings it to the fore.

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When it comes to theory, archaeology is more a follower of fashion than a trendsetter. As archaeologists are well aware, the discipline tends to borrow concepts from fields like social anthropology rather than devising its own. One of the latest anthropological approaches to have attracted archaeological attention is ‘ritual failure’. In this edited volume, Koutrafouri and Sanders focus on the question of when and how ritual fails, giving their contributors free rein to explore this issue as they see fit, rather than forcing them to adopt a uniform perspective on what ritual is. The result is an eclectic, if Old World-focused, set of chapters examining the subject from very different approaches.

The early contributors express some scepticism about the utility of ritual failure as a framework for archaeology. In his foreword, Timothy Insoll notes that ‘differentiating failure from, for example, ritual closure, might not be straightforward’ (20). Using the Neolithic Turkish site of Nevalı Çori as his case study, Marc Verhoeven suggests that it is better to speak of the transformation of ritual practices rather than their termination. Similarly, Jeff Sanders, in his discussion of the Late Bronze or Iron Age Ballachulish Figure from a Scottish bog, proposes that narratives of success or failure be ‘recast in terms of change more generally’ (38).

Text is always a valuable aid when understanding past ritual, as Michael Kozuh’s discussion of the business records from Mesopotamian temples makes clear. Kozuh’s discussion reveals how particular temple rituals were perceived as having been performed incorrectly, with certain individuals then punished for such errors. Taking a rather different approach to the concept of ritual failure, Caroline Malone and Simon Stoddart discuss the termination of Malta’s Neolithic temples as part of