POPULAR ASTRO-ARCHAEOLOGY


It’s too bad about the struggling marriage between Astronomy and Archaeology. Their child, though now well over 100, has never been recognised as legitimate by either side of the house, and as yet still has no name. Archaeologists, in whispered tones call her “Archeo-Astronomy”; Astronomers say “Astro-Archaeology”. Neither side, you will note, seems willing to bestow its own surname on a being so strange and apparently inauspicious.

Can there be doubt about the astronomical alignment of the pyramids, of Stonehenge and of many other temples and megalithic monuments? Does their alignment tell us so little that it’s really unimportant? Most astronomers, I suspect, would answer prejudicially one way while archaeologists, who have the most to gain (or lose), would answer prejudicially the other. The tragedy is that the qualified arbiters—the small circle of practitioners in the field—have never answered these questions very calmly or very convincingly. Alexander Thom, who leads in quantity, quality and respect, apparently speaks too softly and too much in the dry and guarded manner of the engineer. Others in the past, from Piazzi Smyth to Proctor and Lockyer were so much the opposite that they oversold their case and alienated their audience. Each stretched a limited data sample into a grand balloon, puffed it full of speculation, and took off on the lift of his own flamboyancy to dizzying heights of archaeological generalisation. Or so it must have seemed to the army of Egyptologists and archaeologists left labouring on the ground.

In his latest popular account, Beyond Stonehenge, Hawkins takes to the air again, this time on a largely undocumented, take-my-word-for-it aerial tour of known or suspected prehistoric alignments, beginning and ending with nostalgic stops on the plain of Salisbury. Between, the popular reader gets hasty, sometimes spicy tours of suspected alignments in such places as Yucatan, Peru, Spain, Egypt, and the American Midwest. Where necessary, and as time allows, our balloonist-guide stops long enough to set things right, as at the Great Temple of Amon-Ra, where Lockyer, we are told, confused east and west. In other cases, as at Cahokia, Hawkins does not credit the name of the investigator whose work he summarises, leaving the unfortunate impression that he himself discovered it all. It is a book written for Chariots of the Gods and Secrets of the Great Pyramid aficionados (though not so well), in a style that will make astronomers wince and archaeologists groan.

There is a case for Astro-archaeology. Some day it will be accepted as a useful and possibly powerful tool for anthropology. But before that day responsible advocates must first forget all the past ballyhoo, forsake the temptations of playing to the crowd, and take on the more mundane task of painstakingly sifting through what is fact and what is fancy. To convince the doubting archaeologists, practitioners must be scrupulous in all their claims, stopping short of generalisation or embellishment. Thom is doing this for the European megaliths. Hawkins, in books like this, is only adding to the clutter.

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