

Stone Age Soundtracks: the acoustic archaeology of ancient sites

Paul Devereux

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This is the first book length survey of a new direction in Archaeology. Since the discipline was established ancient sites have been extensively mined and studied for their visual aspects, as is apparent from museum culture, which is predicated on what can be *seen*. Indeed many words and phrases we commonly use as unconscious metaphors, like 'apparent', 'regarding', 'review', 'perceive', 'perspective', 'point of view', all connote vision: an example of the student affecting the studied, for we live in a predominantly visual culture.

In Archaeology, though many references to aural life have been exhumed, principally ancient instruments of bone or other surviving material, until recently no systematic attention has been paid to what has always been unmissable in Ethnology, that folk gathering for culturally important purposes also have ears and voices, and can play instruments.

The book reviews recent investigations of ancient sites for their acoustic properties, with the aid of sophisticated instrumentation, or just the use of the investigators voices, in the Western world and elsewhere.

In order to put the acoustic archaeology findings into appropriate context, the author devotes preliminary chapters to ancient attitudes to sound, so different from the general modern attitude towards sound as an inconsequential effect. Thus echoes as the voices of gods and goddesses, oracles often sited at caves, fissures and the like, where amplifications occur, or evidence of acoustic considerations by the ancient builders of stone circles, burial chambers, temples and amphitheatres. There are also chapters on ritual and sound, and the effects of sound on the mind and body. More extensively treated in a number of other books readers of this journal will be familiar with, these summaries are justified here on the reasonable grounds that many potential readers will not be aware of the ancient and esoteric aspects of sound.

The second part discusses the work of various researchers in many different localities in the old and new worlds, in several different types of site. Here we find evidence of acoustic properties in pre-historic painted caves, for example as depictions sited at echo positions, perhaps also illustrating the echo, or stalactites obviously hammered, emitting xylophone-like sounds. The likelihood of the deliberate use of sounds in for example the Newgrange passage grave illustrates the level of discussion, with the fascinating possibility discussed of the use of smoke or steam which would take on visible structure induced by sound waves, however produced, illuminated by the ray of light entering the passage at the important date: this could have seemed to participants at the time like the spirits of the dead taking on form.

Paul Devereux is a respected writer and researcher on archaeological and ancient life-ways themes. This book is based firmly on facts, and the references are, considering the newness of the discipline, extensive. Nevertheless the writing avoids technicalities in the interests of 'the general reader'. In a book of this size and intent there is no room for anecdotes, which presumably explains the lack of reference to the reportedly many old rock gongs in Africa, discussed in Lyall Watson's book *Lightning Bird*. The book is produced in the now popular 'magazine' style, with bordered page sized features providing more depth to parts of the separately ongoing text. There are 34 coloured plates, and many black and white illustrations. I was splendidly fascinated by this book, and by the Channel 4 programme based on it. I hope it finds many more enthusiastic readers.

Clement Jewitt: *Music & Psyche Journal*, Feb. 2003