

CONFERENCE SUMMARY: A HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE



I imagine all of us have different perspectives on this week's discussion of "Astronomy and Cosmology in Folk Traditions and Cultural Heritage." My perspective is that of a North American historian of science, who seeks to understand the astronomies of past cultures and observes those past cultures from the perspective of an outsider. As it turned out, the difference between the perspective of outsiders and insiders was one of the biggest differences of the conference. Many of the workers in Europe are seeking their own past by studying their own culture, while most archaeo- or ethnoastronomical research in previous Oxford conference had concerned the astronomies practiced in other cultures. No matter how great one's emotional investment in the Navajo or the early Britons – and we should always remember that anthropologists and archaeologists do develop an attachment to the peoples they study – this professional bond is of an entirely different order from the strong affective ties that develop in the course of studying one's own community.

Besides this difference in attachment, the historian (and for that matter, the archaeologist) is used to looking at evidence from the past to illuminate the period when that evidence was created. Students of European cultures often look to evidence from the present – or from the recent past – for the light that it sheds on presumed traditions of the distant past. Rather than deal with the whole conference, let me deal with a few topical examples that reflect the historian's concern with historical evidence.

One recurring theme in a number of papers concerned the limits of the oral tradition. Jarita Holbrook provided a marvelous example of how the contemporary people she was studying said their elders knew many more stars than the ten that they themselves knew, while earlier ethnographic literature reports that their elders only knew the same ten stars. That should be a cautionary warning for our faith in the wisdom of the ancients; they may have known more, but as Stanisław Iwaniszewski warned us, the myth of a past Golden Age is a common element of fringe archaeology. Let me add a further version of that myth which I recently

came across (Silberman 1995, p.251-3). The Golden Age, according to this version of the story, is followed by a period of suppression by its opponents, after which the culture and its wisdom is reborn (or resurrected) through the actions of an archaeologist or historian who plays the mythic role of hero. To what extent are we seduced by this attractive role in our attempts to reconstruct ancient knowledge?

Several of our presenters spoke of the diversity of traditions we are trying to reconstruct. Ray Norris reminded us that in Australia there are some 400 different aboriginal linguistic groups; Alejandro Martín-López carried this diversity farther, noting that even within a single community there are diverse – and sometimes competing – subtraditions through which Mocovi cosmology becomes a field of dispute and negotiation. These important insights into the multiplicity of traditions cannot be neglected in future ethnoastronomical work.

Some of the papers built on material more familiar to the historian of astronomy. Examples of this are the papers of Arkadiusz Sołtysiak and Krzysztof Jakubiak detailing elements of Mesopotamian astronomy and of Vito Polcaro and Antonelli Ghignolli using medieval historical material to gain data for interpretation of astronomical theory. Two papers that impressed me for their use of iconographic evidence were Audrius Beinorius's paper on the iconography of Indian astronomy and Jonas Vaiškūnas's on the iconography of a Lithuanian zodiacal bowl. As Beinorius pointed out, Indian iconography demonstrates the transmission of Greek astronomical ideas to India, while Vaiškūnas's example provides a nice illustration of how a living Lithuanian culture absorbs and transforms elements from the zodiac, a zodiac which is in turn transformed as the Christian tradition literally obscures the earlier pagan one. As a historian, incidentally, I'm disappointed that the Christian overpainting that covered the original writing was apparently lost through the modern restoration; it's a reminder that we should not privilege any period in a culture's history.

Flavia Pedrosa Lima reminds us that astronomical interpretation of myths (and interpretation of astronomi-

cal myths) goes back to the 19th century, but she raises the important question of whether those interpretations reflect the point of view of the indigenous mythmaker or of the western interpreter. To what extent are we less than critical in using ethnographic sources that share our values? Arnold Lebeuf, in his study of his clerical antiquarian namesake, alluded to how the interchanges among gentlemen-scholars give insights into seventeenth and eighteenth century scholarship and conceptions, illustrating that an awareness of the historical background of those who wrote our ethnohistorical sources is essential if we are to properly interpret of those sources. Furthermore, we should be conscious of our own tendency to project twenty-first century world views on the people we study. Thus when the philosopher José Fernandez Quintano used the lack of sufficient economic surplus to support a priesthood to explain the apparent lack of ritual on his sites, we seem to have a situation that substitutes Paleolithic secular philosophers for the engineer Alexander Thom's megalithic proto-engineers.

While we're speaking of the Thom paradigm, let me raise one issue that concerns me: the ways in which we gather data that extends over the entire world. I really don't know how to interpret iconographic or folkloric elements, such as those presented by Michael Rappenglück, Roslyn Frank, and Thomas Pedersen, that are distributed widely across the world. On the one hand, one might argue that this wide distribution is a sign of the general acceptance of the astronomical concepts embodied in those elements. On the other, one could argue that by selecting those elements from the whole iconographic and folkloric corpus that are susceptible to astronomical interpretations, we might be engaging in the same kind of data selection for which Alexander Thom was strongly criticized. Have ethnographers, iconographers, and folklorists addressed this question? Perhaps they have, but in such an interdisciplinary forum those methodological questions should be formally addressed.

Another issue related to interdisciplinary understanding stems from the historian's concern that the events and objects we study are produced by historical actors. Let me give a few examples to show what I have in mind. Marco García Quintela studied a well-defined set of sites with "anomalous deer" petroglyphs and found what – at first glance – seem to be indications that these sites were built at astronomically significant places. This seems to relate the celestial deer at these sites to astronomy. A slightly different picture is seen in the presentation of Dainius Razauskas and Vykin-tas Vaitevičius, which clearly showed that certain elements of horse harnesses can be interpreted as lunar, but to the historian, the crucial question is whether the people who made and used these harnesses did so because of their lunar symbolism, or merely because they considered them decorative. To the ethnographer, this may not be important, but to the historian, that is the crucial issue.

Turning from objects to performance, we have Rosalyn Frank's detailed study of the role of Bear and Bird symbolism in modern folklore and performance. There is no doubt that this concept was widespread, but historians would ask whether the authors of the folktale, and the persons who retell it, consider the folk tale as having an astronomical content and whether the present day performers of the ritual-play and their audience recognize the performance as embodying an astronomical metaphor. I don't know whether these questions can be answered definitively, but such questions are definitely worth asking.

References

- SILBERMAN, N. A., 1995. Promised Lands and Chosen Peoples: The Politics and Poetics of Archaeological Narrative. In: P.L. KOHL AND C. FAWCETT, ed. *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stephen C. McCluskey, President of ISAAC