

Current Studies in Archaeoastronomy

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Conversations Across Time and Space

*Selected Papers from the
Fifth Oxford International Conference
at Santa Fe, 1996*

Edited by

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and

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Introduction

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The “Oxford” Meetings

It is a pleasure to introduce this volume of papers presented at the 1996 meeting on “Cultural Aspects of Astronomy”, held at St. John’s College in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA, August 3–9, 1996. This was the fifth in a series of “Oxford Conferences on Archaeoastronomy” and the first held in the US Southwest, and got the working name “Oxford V”.

The Oxford Conferences are a series of triennial meetings that have focused on the role that astronomical phenomena have played in human societies, ranging from the applied (such as the basis for calendrics and orientations) to the ceremonial (the significance given the “ritual landscape” of the sky). These conferences serve as a meeting place for those working in anthropology, archaeology, history and prehistory, archaeoastronomy, and other studies of human cultures, who share a common interest in the importance of astronomical phenomena (or “sky-watching”) to traditional societies of the past and present. The emphasis of these meetings is on the reaction of human societies to these astronomical phenomena as part of the worldview of each society. The astronomical phenomena are universal, while the reactions to them are part of (and unique to) each culture.

The first of these meetings (called in retrospect “Oxford I”) was held at Oxford University (England) in 1981, and was the first major international conference on archaeoastronomy. Further ones have converged on a three-year interval—Oxford II in Mexico (1986), Oxford III in Scotland (1990), Oxford IV in Bulgaria (1993), and then Oxford V in Santa Fe. We note that Oxford VI (1999) has just come to a very successful end in the Canary Islands, and the time and place of Oxford VII will be announced soon.

This series of “Oxford” meetings and the publications that have come out of them show clearly the powerful effect that simply getting like-minded people together for a week to compare notes and ideas can have on a field of study. Prior to Oxford I there had been only regional and specialized meetings on various aspects of past astronomical practices. Oxford I brought together this past work as well

as newcomers to the field, and helped define a more general study of archaeoastronomy. The later meetings built on this beginning and explored the variety of research in this area.

Through the Oxford meetings, many from a variety of disciplines have come to realize the importance of astronomical phenomena in the development and even the daily life of peoples throughout the world. This has led to a broader knowledge of past cultures, and some understanding of the motivations that led to the traditions, constructions and artifacts by which we now know them.

The Nature of Oxford V

Oxford V was the first meeting of this series to be announced on the World Wide Web at <http://www.lpl.arizona.edu/oca/oxv.htm>. Also, it was the first to be publicized widely in professional circles in archaeology and anthropology. The result was a larger and more varied attendance, and a broader range of topics discussed, than had been the case at the earlier meetings. Astronomers made up a third of the attendees, and archeologists and anthropologists another third. The remaining third were distributed among a number of disciplines (Gumerman and Warburton, this volume, Table I.). There was unfortunately only one person from religious studies—this is an area that future meetings could contact profitably. Another result was that Oxford V avoided becoming a regional meeting—papers dealing with the US Southwest were in the minority, and most presentations dealt with other parts of the World. The Oxford meetings are now established internationally through a wide range of disciplines, and this continued at Oxford VI.

As usual, the attendees define a meeting. Get enough good people there and it works. By publicizing the meeting widely and accepting the great majority of applicants, we let Oxford V define itself (and archaeoastronomy) through the interests of the attendees rather than set up *a priori* guidelines. This allows the subject areas of the meetings to evolve with time. The attendees are listed in an appendix, as are the meeting program and the list of poster papers presented. We note that about half the presentations at the meeting were in the form of posters. This allowed for fewer and longer talks, and more time for discussion. Each lot of posters was on display for three days. Specific times each day were set aside for the posters, with no competition from talks or other events, so attendees could all view them. The poster style of presentation worked well at Oxford V, and allowed more time for discussion of each than would have been possible had it been given as a talk. The papers in this volume are based equally on talks and posters presented at Oxford V.

Santa Fe was the clear choice for the site of Oxford V in the United States. It is a fascinating town (“The City Different”) ringed by mountains in the lovely high plateau country of New Mexico. It is easily accessible, yet avoids the unpleasant sprawl and summer heat of the major cities of the Southwest. It brings together several threads of history—the Spanish and then Mexican rule of the area, starting in the 16th century, followed by the 19th century acquisition by the United States—while around it is the living Indian Pueblo world which derives from the complex prehistoric Pueblo cultures that are proving to have had a rich astronomical tradition. The surrounding area bears witness to many millennia of human activity.

The meeting was held on the campus of St. John's College, with magnificent views down to Santa Fe and across the Rio Grande to Los Alamos and the Jemez Mountains. The main lecture hall held the conference comfortably, and opened onto the poster area where a bar was set up each evening at "poster time". The attendees stayed in the dormitories and ate together in the main dining room, letting us all enjoy a collegial atmosphere for the meeting. One day was spent on a visit to the world-famous silver and pottery collections at the School of American Research in Santa Fe, and on a trip to the Comanche Gap petroglyph field near Lamy. After the meeting, a number of attendees went on a three-day guided tour of the archaeological riches of Chaco Canyon (the Chaco Culture National Historic Park) (<<http://www.nps.gov/chcu/>>).

The petroglyph on the cover of this volume was suggested by Polly Schaafsma as the identifying symbol of Oxford V. It was used on the poster and on the Web Site <<http://www.lpl.arizona.edu/oca/pet.htm>> that announced the meeting, and on the lovely commemorative T-shirt that Abbie Morris designed for us (as seen in the Oxford V group picture at <<http://www.lpl.arizona.edu/oca/group400.htm>>). This glyph is located in the Petroglyph National Monument in New Mexico <<http://www.nps.gov/petr/>>, across the Rio Grande from Albuquerque. It is one of several in that area that Polly interprets as Venus glyphs (Schaafsma, this volume).

Acknowledgments

The success of Oxford V was due to the work of many people. We would first like to single out Ray and Ruby White and Suzy Chippindale for praise for actually making the meeting happen day by day. Mike Zeilik made Oxford V known internationally through the World Wide Web and the posters. In addition to them, the others on the Organizing Committee—George Gumerman, Ed Krupp, Bill Longacre, Steve McCluskey, Peter Pesic, and Ray Williamson—played important and sometimes vital roles in the planning of the meeting. We are grateful to Joe Shaffer and Irene Sadler and the staff of St. John's College for being our hosts and for making our stay at the College so pleasant.

Doug Schwartz and Duane Anderson of the School of American Research are to be thanked for inviting us to visit their world-famous collections. Henry Singleton graciously allowed us to visit the Comanche Gap site on the San Cristóbal Ranch. J. D. Arnold of Rocky Mountain Tours, Santa Fe, did a splendid job of supplying transportation and very comfortable life support for the trip to Chaco Canyon. Dave Phillips and Steve Lekson served ably as our guides in Chaco, and made our trip both instructive and enjoyable.

And a final thanks to all who came to Oxford V and made the meeting worth attending.

References

Gumerman, George and Miranda Warburton, this volume.
Schaafsma, Polly, this volume.

