S-4 – Local, regional, and transregional perspectives on ancient and medieval astronomy

Commission on the History of Ancient and Medieval Astronomy

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Abstract:
The astronomical traditions and practices of the ancient and medieval periods followed highly complex trajectories. A naive picture would portray their development as one from a few local sites of activity, gradually spreading through processes of transmission, selection, and merging so that by the late Middle Ages a small number of dominant traditions prevailed over large, multilingual regions, pointing towards the globalization of a "mainstream" astronomy in recent centuries. While not entirely false, this model is inadequate to describe the richness of the ancient and medieval astral sciences, and in particular the power of cultural contexts to modify and localize received and appropriated knowledge. The present symposium seeks to explore pre-modern astronomy as an entity that was constantly in flux from contrary tendencies towards uniformity and local diversity.

Proposed papers relate to astronomy and allied sciences in Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Greco-Roman world, India, China, Islam, and Latin Europe. The local-global polarity will be examined not only from "outside," that is, from the modern historian's perspective, but also as it was articulated within the ancient and medieval traditions, for example with respect to the ways that geographically or culturally extraneous elements, either real or perceived, were represented—or sometimes elided over—in texts and imagery associated with astronomy in particular places. The relationship between astronomy and geographical data and perceptions will be a point of special interest.

Within the symposium will be incorporated two sub-symposia on special topics within our broad theme.
"Towards a Database of Astronomical Tables" presents a group of papers relating to a collective project in which research experiences, needs and know-how on the analysis of pre-modern astronomical tables with modern computational power are shared and new research tools built. Historians of science have often responded ambivalently to these quantitative methods of analysis. On the one hand, many agree that we should make the best possible use of what computer-assisted analysis of historical sources can provide; yet on the other hand, some sceptics fear that a “technical smoke screen” may generate conclusions that lack historical or cultural sensitivity.

"The Local and the Global in Medieval Islamic Astronomy" is a shared subsymposium cosponsored by CHOSTIS. (At the scheduling stage, therefore, we will request that at least two 90-minute blocks of our symposium should not overlap with the CHOSTIS symposium so that all members of both commissions can attend this subsymposium.) Its theme reflects that of the symposium as a whole, as applied specifically to the medieval Islamic world.

Keywords: astronomy – antiquity – Middle Ages – transmission – geography.
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10. Liang Li
11. Richard Kremer
12. Aditya Kolachana
13. Husson Matthieu
14. Kim Plofker
15. Sally P. Ragep
16. Glen Van Brummelen
17. Yoichi Isahaya
18. Christián C. Carman
19. Myyasandra Subrahmanyam Sriram
20. Teije de Jong
21. Jacqueline Feke
22. Johannes Thomann
23. María José Parra Pérez
24. Emilia Calvo
25. Rosa Comes
26. Dirk Grupe
27. Zoë Misiewicz
28. Anuj Misra
29. James Carl Evans
30. Zhou Liqun
31. Aníbal Szapiro
32. Sita Sundar Ram