

Astronomy Talk 4th November 2017

Archaeoastronomy: Ancient Monuments and their Use of the Sky

Diana Challis came to give us this at Archeoastronomy in different cultures. First we looked at how the precession of the equinoxes affected those that wanted a north line, and then at the way cultures have different uses of the sky depending on their latitude.

Farming communities mostly use the Sun, solstices and equinoxes. Desert cultures tend to use lunar cycles. Nomads use star based systems, e.g. helical rising to denote important dates. Some cultures use the planets, e.g. the Maya and Venus.

We looked at various monuments from the British Isles, Africa and the Americas. In the British Isles we looked at New Grange in Ireland, at the Orkneys and of course Stonehenge. The cultures seem to have associated the winter solstice “the death of the year” with the human cycle of birth and death. There is no good evidence that the megaliths at Carnac in Brittany have any astronomical significance.

In Africa we looked at Zimbabwe (Great Zimbabwe), Kenya and Egypt. Nabta Playa in the Nubian Desert is thought to be the oldest monument in the world.

In America we looked at Machu Picchu and the Incas, at Chichen Itza and the Mayans, at Teotihuacan and the Aztecs, and lastly at Chaco Canyon in New Mexico.

Finally we looked at some modern “imitations”, e.g. Carhenge in Nebraska and Cannings Long Barrow in Wiltshire.