“Road to the Stars”. Oxford XI; European Society for Astronomy in Culture (SEAC) 25; Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena (INSAP) X Joint Conference, Santiago de Compostela 18th–22nd September 2017

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A joint meeting of the annual SEAC and triennial Oxford conferences was held in 2007 in Lithuania, but Oxford XI was the first concurrent meeting of all three international associations on cultural astronomy. For a week in September, 300 participants came together to discuss and exchange ideas on all aspects relating to the study of astronomy in culture. This meeting was prolific in every respect.

Each of these conferences is, in its own right, an ideal platform for research on the study of the sky, but the 91 presentations and 24 posters of this conference covered a unique breadth of topics and approaches. A truly international forum, representing more than 30 countries across five continents, was just as diverse in the disciplines represented: archaeologists, astrophysicists, historians of science, anthropologists, computer scientists, artists, educational scientists, all sharing the same passion: the study of the night sky. The presence of so many disciplines under one roof created a wonderfully fertile think-tank, and facilitated constructive dialogues, the challenging of ideas, reinterpretations of earlier work and communication of the latest (and, in a number of cases, controversial) research. Conferences with such diverse approaches and topics usually run with parallel sessions, but the painstaking dedication of the Santiago conference organisers resulted in a programme which allowed participants to attend every talk and still have time for social activities during the week.

Discussion on methodological approaches to archaeoastronomy and cultural astronomy are always a feature of SEAC and Oxford conferences, often igniting ardent discussions. Revisions and improvements of our approach to the study of cultural astronomy are essential for the evolution of the field, making the talks on reassessing earlier established methodologies, practices, technology and assumptions particularly welcome. Exciting

experimental work on the visibility of stars presented novel insights into the ways that colours can affect magnitude visibility as well as the effect of refraction in star visibility. These findings impact directly on archaeoastronomical research and interpretations.

Archaeoastronomy in prehistoric cultures was represented through a number of papers focusing on the study of structures in Europe (Britain, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, Romania) and beyond, such as the megalithic sites of Saudi Arabia and stone rows in Mongolia. These studies highlighted the great challenges that archaeoastronomy faces in interpreting prehistoric cultures, and the need for rigorous methodology. The discussions which followed these presentations exemplified the need for in-depth methodological dialogues as a means of making progress in this field. The merging of empirical and field data is paramount, but what is even more important is the verification and calibration of data which has been handed down.

The classical world, Egypt and Mesopotamia could not be absent from a conference celebrating the beginnings of astronomy and, indeed, talks on these did not disappoint in their diversity of approaches and progress in our understanding. Studies on the role of astronomy in ritual practice were complemented by research on ancient timekeeping and astronomical instruments, offering a contextual and rounded discussion on astronomy's practical and religious function in these cultures. Papers dedicated to the role of astronomy in Roman cities presented very interesting arguments on the relationship between Roman urbanism and astronomy, with research presented on the astronomical correlations between city grids offering interesting discussions on the differentiation of public and religious structures from the canonical, orthogonal urban grid. Contextualised archaeoastronomical methodology addressing broader archaeological concerns (such as identity, syncretism, cultural interactions and so on) was particularly welcome, since archaeoastronomical approaches very often suffer from the tendency to leave out contextual interpretations by drawing the line merely at suggesting astronomical correlations. This conference offered a plethora of archaeoastronomical approaches pertinent to experience, mobility, topography and the spatial organisation of structures; to literature and myth, and to ethnography, anthropology and artefacts as expressions of ideas, beliefs and symbolism.

An unexpected number of papers focused on the study of the orientation of Christian churches, and the role of the Sun was evident in many of these presentations. Particularly interestingly, in a number of cases results were enriched with interpretations relating to the impact of church illumination by sunlight in ritual experience. Such approaches demonstrate clearly the valuable contribution of the study of astronomy in our reconstructions of past cultures and past experience of space, be this urban or religious.

The role of astronomy in spatial studies was also explored. The experience of ritual landscapes through the observation of astronomy was discussed particularly in relation to Mesoamerican cultures. From structural orientations, to ritual landscapes and the performance of ritual as a means of comprehending the cosmos, the Mesoamerican papers demonstrated the predominant concern and relevance of astronomy in structuring belief systems.

Cognitive interpretations of modern understanding of extraterrestrial landscapes offered insightful parallels on the ways archaeologists attempt to interpret cognition of landscapes in past cultures. The example of how people get over disorientation in new landscapes by focusing on familiar aspects and features they can relate to drew links with interpretational work currently being carried out in landscape archaeology. Surprising features of the conference were cognitive approaches involving collaboration between astrophysicists and artists and discussions on the role of astronomy in musicology, theatre, literature and films.

Anthropological and ethnographic perspectives enriched the conference and showcased important work being carried out with local communities and the diversity of possible approaches to cultural astronomy. From Japan, China and Malaysia, to Australia, Armenia, Europe and America, the sessions and papers were truly universal in their approaches, methodology and geographical span. They demonstrated that there is still much to learn from local communities. On the other, we heard about difficulties in communication between scientific research and local communities, but more importantly, how we can proactively overcome such obstacles and how it is possible to achieve a true integration of these communities by keeping them involved and informed. Training in cultural astronomy is essential in raising awareness of the value of local community integration and in constructing methodologically rigorous approaches. The two papers on the development of academic degrees specifically designed as training platforms in cultural astronomy epitomised the need to think seriously about how we can best promote the study and training of cultural astronomy, in order to address future challenges.

Training was addressed also in the context of treating cultural astronomy as a bridge between tourism and heritage. The results of public activities such as “urban spacewalks”, which promote cultural astronomy and welcome the participation of the wider public, were related and discussed, whilst at the same time, the conference itself offered educational opportunities. A talk on the process of submitting proposals to UNESCO for the Astronomy and World Heritage initiative offered a rare occurrence where such experience is shared in academic conferences. An educational opportunity was also offered through the conference’s interaction with the community of Santiago. An exciting initiative called “Nerdmight” attracted some 200 people – apparently the best attended to-date – in a central city café, where astrophysicists offered jargon-free short talks on topics like dark matter and cosmology.

Overall, the conference was successful on every level. The diversity of representations was unequivocal: astrophysicists from NASA, Britain, Spain and Argentina; Japanese, Malaysian, Argentinean, Brazilian, European archaeologists; and North American anthropologists, together demonstrate the many combinations of nations and disciplines represented. At the same time, the conference was a rare occasion where the field’s most eminent pioneers from across the world were in one place: Professors Juan Antonio Belmonte (Spain), Stephen McCluskey (USA), Stanislaw Iwaniszewski (Mexico), Clive Ruggles (UK) and Bradley Schaeffer (USA).

For the next six years at least, each of these conferences will go its separate way. The next SEAC is scheduled to take place in 2018 in Graz, Austria. Oxford XII will be held in

2020 in La Plata, Argentina and the next INSAP is anticipated in 2019–2020. The bar has been raised. We look forward to the future of the study of cultural astronomy. It promises to be bright!