

The History of Astronomy

If you have a passion for star gazing, telescopes, the Hubble and the universe and this thing we call "astronomy", you are far from alone. Of course, we know that astronomy is a highly respected science that has produced some of the most amazing accomplishments of the twentieth century. On top of that, it is a thriving area of fascination and one of the most exciting hobby areas going with thousands of astronomy clubs and tens of thousands of amateur astronomers watching the stars every night just like we do.

But did you know that astronomy is one of the oldest and most respected sciences of them all? As far back as before the times of Christ, the wise and thinking people of societies of the time were looking at the stars and finding ways to track and chart them. We who love the hobby of astronomy can chart a proud history of astronomers that tracks across millennia and through virtually every culture in civilization. So for the sake of having some really good trivia to toss around at astronomy club next week, let's highlight some of the big moments in the history of astronomy.

For many centuries the science of astronomy was not distinct from the practice of astrology. For clarity, astronomy is the study of the stars, planets, and the universe with a clearly scientific approach. Astrology is the study of the zodiac signs and how they influence our growth, our personalities and our daily lives. In modern times, we as people of science discount the astrological side and focus on the astronomy of the heavens. But they were one study for millennia before the age of science made them separate.

There is historical evidence that astronomy was a recognized science as far back as the Babylonian civilization hundreds of years before Christ. But the study of the stars was not limited to one country. There were similar movements going on in China, India, and Ancient Egypt and all over the Arabian Peninsula. The integration of astronomy and religion is so prevalent that we see it in the Christmas story in which the Magi, Zoroastrian priesthood probably from the equivalent of ancient Syria, followed a star to the Christ child. These astronomers were also astrologers and it was that mixture that lead them to be part of this historic event.

The first book on astronomy was written by Ptolemy during the Greek empire. Since that historic publication, the who's who list of great astronomers charts a path right through the center of modern science including Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Sir Issac Newton, Jung, Michelangelo, Benjamin Franklin and more recently even Einstein and Stephen Hawking would join that noble list. It seemed that from the renaissance on to this day, virtually any man or woman of intellect dabbled in astronomy at least somewhat and it has always been considered a sign of the learned to know about the universe and things astronomical.

Astronomy has had an impact on so many areas of our lives that we really don't recognize. Many words in our language had their roots in astronomy such as...

* Influenza which comes from the Latin root word for influence. This reflects an early belief that the position of the moon and stars may influence health and cause or cure disease.

* Disaster which comes from the Latin for "bad star".

* Lunatic which has the root word "Luna" in it which is the Latin word for moon. This highlights the long held belief that is even prevalent today that irrational behavior and even wild and dangerous things happen during a full moon.

Astronomy and its interrelationship with astrology has also influenced culture, education and religion to a very large extent over the centuries. In the English language, the first two days of our week, Sunday and Monday are a reference to astronomy as their literal interpretations would be "The Day of the Sun" and "The Day of the Moon."

So if you have found astronomy becoming a consuming passion in your thoughts and what fascinates you about the world we live in, you are in great company as this area of study has been a major part of culture and thought virtually since the dawn of civilization. And it will continue to fascinate mankind for as long as those beautiful stars shine over our heads.

PPPPP 734