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Did ancient Egyptians do 'scientific' astronomy?

Friday 12 June 2020 13:30 (30 minutes)

We look for evidence of recognisably 'scientific' astronomy three to four thousand years ago, in ancient Egypt. In this talk we will present some texts, objects, and instruments that demonstrate ancient Egyptian interest in the way the night sky functions. We will start by discussing an autobiographical text that recounts the invention process of a new time-keeping instrument, a seasonally-adjusted water clock. The process began with research in a temple library and ended with presentation to the pharaoh, closely following what we call the Scientific Method. Moving from texts to tabular information, diagonal star tables appear on the underside of coffin lids as a representation of how stars move across the night sky depending on the time of year. Of particular interest are the end of these tables that show the final five days of the year. Finally, we will describe a very clearly observationally-based set of texts which map stars in more detail over the course of the year. Together, these texts and tables represent a moving picture of the ancient Egyptian night sky. However, questions remain about the way the observations were conducted and, hence, the identifications of the stars used.

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