

The study of the astronomical practices, celestial lore, mythologies, religions and world-views of all ancient cultures is called archaeoastronomy.

It is described, in essence, as the "anthropology of astronomy", to distinguish it from the "history of astronomy".

Many of the great monuments and ceremonial constructions of early civilizations were astronomically aligned, and two well-known ancient archaeological sites seem to have had an astronomical purpose.

The Orion mystery, as it is dubbed, purports that the geometry and brightness of the stars in the Orion constellation are mirrored in the alignment and size of the great pyramids of Egypt.

While this claim remains hypothetical, it is nevertheless clear that ancient Egyptians incorporated astronomy with architecture.

In the Temple of Abu Simbel, for example, sunlight penetrates a sacred chamber to illuminate a statue of Ramses on October 18, which ushered in the start of the Egyptian civil year.

Astronomy did not exist on its own, however, but as one limb of a larger body whose other limbs included agriculture and the after-life.

In this sense, astronomy linked the two themes humans are most obsessed with: life and death.

Around the same period, another monument was erected that combines religion, architecture and astronomy.

Stonehenge was built in three separate stages, starting in approximately 3000 B.C.

Mostly it remains a mystery, but two clues offer some enlightenment.

One is that the megalithic arrangement is not random nor purely aesthetic but astronomical: It marks the solstice and lunar phases.

The other is that archaeological excavations have revealed it was also used in religious ceremonies.

Chinese records suggest their own astronomical observations dated from the same period;

Indian sacred books point to earlier observations;

and Babylonian clay tablets show Chaldean priests had been observing the sky (including the motion of the visible planets and of eclipses) shortly thereafter.

But the earliest physical vestige of an observatory in fact, lies in southern Egypt.

Surprisingly it is probably not the product of a Semitic (Syrian or Babylonian) peoples but rather sub-Saharan, as evidenced by analysis of a human jawbone found on site.

The Nabta site is the African equivalent of Stonehenge except it predates it by some 1,500 years.