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An Introduction to the History of Archaeoastronomy By Carolyn Kennett

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For thousands of years, human civilisations have looked to the sky, recording the movements of the sun, stars, and planets in ancient texts. From the cuneiform tablets of Mesopotamia to the hieroglyphs of Egypt, references to celestial bodies abound. Alongside these written records from across the globe, there are numerous ancient structures built by diverse cultures over millennia that appear to be aligned with the cardinal directions or possibly with specific celestial events such as solstices and equinoxes.

These structures were erected by different communities and held different meanings for the groups who built and used them. Stone circles, burial mounds, and massive earthworks from the Neolithic and Bronze Age are found throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland. Unlike the civilisations of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, we do not have written records to accompany these monuments. Their meaning and purpose have therefore been left to the investigations (and sometimes the imaginations) of those who have found these places intriguing enough to study them.

Over time, scholars, archaeologists, and astronomers have examined these sites and proposed that many may have been designed with the movements of the heavens in mind, in doing so they have suggested how these structures could offer important clues to how our ancestors understood and interacted with the cosmos. This book traces the development of these interpretations from their tentative beginnings through to more systematic and scientific approaches. It explores the stories behind the theories, the people who proposed them, and the criticisms they faced. It presents a concise history of archaeoastronomy in Britain and Ireland as it developed into an academic, multidisciplinary field.

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