

Explained in 60 Seconds: Cultural Astronomy

Key Words

Written Communication
Case Study

Cultural astronomy has several formal definitions, but, in a nutshell, it is the study of the relationship that humans have with the night sky. This topic overlaps with the larger issue of how humans have responded to their natural environment over the ages. Archaeoastronomy is the most popular branch of cultural astronomy and encompasses how studying the heavens was embraced by the cultures of ancient civilizations. Stone tombs and monuments are the lasting legacies of this ancient cultural knowledge of the night sky. There are also studies of celestial knowledge being used as a form of social control, such as by the Sun King Shaka Zulu, and studies of how

humans have used the sky to try to predict the future. The history of astronomy and the myths and legends associated with the night sky are nowadays an integral part of introductory astronomy classes, star parties and planetarium shows. In modern times, astronomy has also influenced our culture, through art, dance, music and poetry. Cultural astronomy engages the public by showing a human side of astronomy that people can relate to.

JC Holbrook
University of California

One of 177 Antas, a distinctive form of megalithic tomb, found in the central part of the Alentejo region, Portugal, and in the provinces of Badajoz and Cáceres, in the Extremadura region of Spain. These tombs are thought to have been constructed from c. 4000 BC onwards. The range of orientations of the 177 monuments corresponds almost exactly to the range of possible rising positions of the Sun. Credit: I. Gomes (www.flickr.com/photos/ivogomes). More information: www.astronomicalheritage.org

