
The circular zodiac of the temple of Hator at Dendera is, perhaps, one of the best-known astronomical Egyptian relics. Today at the Louvre Museum, it remains at the centre of a heated debate among archaeologists, historians and scientists, and the so-called representatives of “unofficial history.” This debate began immediately upon the bas-relief’s very discovery.

This remarkable discovery took place during Napoleon’s campaign of 1798-1801 against the Ottomans. A number of scientists and artists eager to study local antiquities joined the French expedition to Egypt. The savants recorded the circular zodiac, and another rectangular zodiac at the same temple of Hator, in several drawings made on the spot, which were thereafter engraved and published. These often unreliable preliminary reports supported early hypotheses about the function and the date of the zodiacs. By the fall of 1820, almost two decades after the English troops had forced Napoleon’s army to leave Egypt, another French expedition was set up to secretly steal the stone ceiling with the circular zodiac from the temple of Hator. The antique arrived in Paris at the beginning of 1822, that is, at the height of the dispute about its historical significance.

This noteworthy book by Jed Z. Buchwald and Diane Greco Josefowicz does not add any new element to this never-ending controversy. Instead, and more interestingly, the book offers the reader a very detailed survey of the beginning and evolution of the original debate before, during and after the ceiling’s arrival in Paris. As is the case for many scientific controversies, there were more than two theories, each exclusively based upon scientific and historical reasoning. The attempt to determine astronomically when the Egyptians had made the Dendera zodiacs led to an extraordinary conclusion, which was embraced by the exponents of the enlightenment and the post-revolutionary party. The alleged identification of the stars, the determination of the solstitial and equinoctial points within the Egyptian constellations, and the amount of the displacement of such points due to the precession of the equinoxes, indicated that the zodiacs had a very early date of manufacture, probably between 13,000 and 15,000 BCE. This date was earlier than the epoch when the Noachian Deluge was said to have taken place. This established date upset the religious right and those people who, even under Napoleon’s empire, continued to be nostalgic about the old monarchy. The right brought forth its own theories, claiming a very recent date of the making of the zodiacs, possibly during the period of the Roman domination over Egypt.

Between 1801 and 1833, antiquarians, artists, archaeologists, astronomers, mathematicians, philologists, politicians, and theologians seized the occasion to speak their own minds concerning the disconcerting artefact and to propose other dates of production. Buchwald and Greco Josefowicz reconstruct the life and intellectual background of each protagonist in the controversy, placing their respective activities and
reactions to the zodiac’s affair in the context of the day. The authors do not neglect wrong or misleading theories, dead ends or disconcerting *coup de scène*. For the historian of science (and of astronomy in particular), the most valuable lesson emerging from this careful analysis of the controversy is the ever-present risk of fooling oneself with a partial examination of ancient documents. This lesson is also expressed in the Epilogue of the book, by the polymath Jean-Antoine Letronne (1725-1848), who admitted that the problem of historical interpretation does not rest so much in taking advantage of a certain method (astronomical, philological, antiquarian, etc.) in analysing the sources, but rather in considering a specific method as the only legitimate one in providing a truthful response to historical questions. When evaluating a source, and especially one that is particularly problematic because of its antiquity and the absence of written sources, the historian must combine a large number of different methods.

Such a combination is, in fact, what Buchwald and Greco JoseOWicz have themselves successfully accomplished in their book, which includes iconographic material, a full set of footnotes, an extensive bibliography, and three indexes of figure sources, subjects and names.

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