

Early astronomy in context: the view from the museum

Instruments were a key feature of the medieval European corpus astronomicum, with texts on the quadrant and astrolabe featuring as regular accompaniments to Sacrobosco's *De sphaera*. As part of a curriculum extending from the basics of calculation to the calendar and planetary motions, instrument manuals were embedded in the didactic culture of the universities. However, if we switch from manuscripts to surviving instruments, what do the actual objects reveal about both the practice and the wider reception of astronomy? Though typically anonymous and undated, and lacking a definite indication of geographical origin, the instruments are nevertheless rich sources when examined comparatively –indicating the diversity of likely owners, the distribution of craft skills and the longevity of devices which were reworked and updated over long periods. The act of handling and using original instruments is also highly suggestive, hinting at astronomy as a form of embodied knowledge, whose effective performance required a particular comportment and set of gestures from its early users. Surviving objects nevertheless only take us so far: we can see from other evidence that there are significant absences from the record of modern collections. I conclude by using the example of Merton College Oxford both to assess how (un)representative are the mechanisms of survival and also to underline the value of reconnecting medieval archives and instruments.

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