

# In Harmony with the Cosmos: Of Calendars & Priests

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**D**uring a recent discussion of 'Cosmology in Culture' (Campion, 2017), the notion came up that astronomy might have been the purview of scientific thought, while cosmology seemed more the domain of priestly concerns, at least in the past. McCluskey asked about the role of calculation in this scheme, which focused attention on calendars and their role in keeping cultures in harmony with the cosmos. The task of maintaining this heavenly harmony was often carried out by the priestly class.

Perhaps the most famous example of a priestly adjustment of the calendar in order to bring it in harmony with the cosmos was Julius Caesar's reform that is still used today around the globe (with minor adjustments by Pope Gregory III). In 46 BCE, Caesar re-structured the yearly calendar of the Roman world. As Pontifex Maximus, the highest priest of the Roman religion (Hamlyn, 2011), Caesar had the power to move heaven and earth in order to restore cosmic harmony.

In ancient Athens, the chief priests of Eleusis calculated the intercalations of the lunar month in order to maintain the alignment of the Lesser Mysteries with Spring (Anthesterion, the month of flowers) and of the Greater Mysteries with Fall (Boedromion), the two solar seasons of the equinoxes (Mylonas, 1961). A cultic pre-occupation with the equinox can be traced across cultures for millennia, as in the most ancient temples of Malta (Lomsdalen, 2014), in Rome's Mithraic Mysteries (Ulansey, 1989; Beck, 2006), and even in Mesoamerica, where Montezuma's Templo Mayor had priests offering human sacrifice as the Sun rose at the equinox.

"Evidently the priest and worshippers faced to the east to view the sunrise between the twin temples atop the great pyramid... The extensive plaza fronting the twin temples atop the Templo Mayor platform would have provided an excellent vantage point for witnessing the main event that usually took place there. High on the terrace above, a victim, stretched out on his back over a carved stone and held fast by four assistants, could be seen awaiting sacrifice to the Aztec sun god. This took place when the High Priest plunged a flint knife into the victim's chest and tore out the beating heart, offering it to the sun, thus ensuring the continuation of the movement of the solar deity on his course." – Anthony Aveni, *Skywatchers: A Revised and Updated Version of Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), p. 238.

Deadly violence could erupt when the priestly prerogative of seasonal calculations was seen to be under threat. Hypatia's lynching in Alexandria may have been sparked by her efforts at establishing the date of the equinox for the calculation of Easter. Such usurping hubris may have aroused murderous intent in the followers of Cyril, bishop of Alexandria (Ari Belenkiy, 'The Novatian 'Indifferent Canon' and Pascha in Alexandria in 414: Hypatia's Murder Case Reopened.' *Vigiliae Christianae* 70. Brill, 2016).

The predictive knowledge of astronomical calculations gave prophetic powers to those who could make such computations, whether in predicting eclipses, or predicting even more dire events. A recent example was the end of the Maya Long Count, a phenomenon that caused much consternation in 2012.

A more ancient example was the 'Anno Domini' calendar that the Scythian monk Dionysius Exiguus devised in 525, a calendar dating system used today around the world. Like the Maya calculations, Anno Domini may have been based on an end-of-times computation (Sepp Rothwangl, 'The Scythian Dionysius Exiguus and his Invention of Anno Domini.' *Proceedings* of 2016 Symposium 'Megalithic Monuments and Cult Practices,' South-West University, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria).

The priestly role in determining calendars seems to have been taken seriously around the globe for thousands of years.