



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
FACULTY OF SCIENCE
Rotheby Astrophysical Observatory



Interdisciplinary
Institute



ARAB-GERMAN
YOUNG ACADEMY
OF SCIENCES AND
HUMANITIES

With funding from the:



Federal Ministry
of Research, Technology
and Space

International Workshop
Gazing at the Sky with Ancient Eyes
Dark Skies in the Past and Today

hosted by the School of Divinity, History, Philosophy and Art History
University of Aberdeen
28–30 June 2026

*In memory of James Gregory (1638–1675),
astronomer and alumnus of Marischal College, Aberdeen*

One of Scotland’s greatest natural treasures is its extensive areas of land with minimal light pollution, where we can still observe truly dark skies. Importantly, such areas can be accessed with some ease. Scottish dark skies have their well-known and expansive counterpart above what is now Canada. It is therefore natural for the University of Aberdeen and the University of Calgary — alongside other partners — to come together in the exploration of this phenomenon.

The workshop will explore this theme from a multidisciplinary perspective. In the context of the humanities, we will ask how the experience of being exposed to skies unpolluted by artificial light shaped the development of human culture, religion, and science in antiquity. Modern sciences will bring other pertinent questions, such as what the term ‘dark

sky’ actually means in terms of physics, or how light pollution affects fauna, flora, and humans. Further, legal and ethical aspects of light pollution will be discussed in the context of policymaking. In exploring these questions, we will gain insights also from observational practices grounded in community knowledge.

This exploratory workshop will take place on the campus of the University of Aberdeen in Old Aberdeen but with hybrid delivery of lectures and presentations, welcoming participants and speakers in person and online alike. The event is open to professional academics, students at all levels, pupils of secondary schools, policymakers, and members of the public. It is envisaged as the first in a series of events dedicated to dark skies, in the past and today.

Co-operation Partners

Rothney Astrophysical Observatory, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Interdisciplinary Institute, University of Aberdeen

Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA), Germany

Aberdeen Astronomical Society (AAS), Aberdeen

Harlaw Academy, Aberdeen

Biblical Antiquity in Science & History, University of Aberdeen Student Society

Cairngorms International Dark Sky Park, Cairngorms, Scotland, UK

Keynote Speakers

Professor Eshbal Ratzon, Tel Aviv University, Israel
British Academy Visiting Fellow at the University College London
with the project “Cosmology, Astronomy, and Theology in the Dead Sea Scrolls” (2026)

Dr Philip Langill, University of Calgary, Canada
Director of the Rothney Astrophysical Observatory
& Member of the Committee for the Protection of Astronomy and the Space Environment (COMPASSE) of the American Astronomical Society

Programme

All times: Mountain Time / British Summer Time / Gulf Standard Time.

All in-room activities will be streamed online.

I. INTRODUCTION TO DARK SKIES

Sunday, 28 June

New King's, NK10

Welcome

8:15 / 15:15 / 18:15

by Dr Jakub Zbrzeźny, Organiser & Project Lead, University of Aberdeen (in person)

Opening Address

8:20 / 15:20 / 18:20

by Professor Ben Tatler, Vice-Principal (Research), University of Aberdeen (in person)

Keynote Lecture 1: Dark Skies in the Past

8:30 / 15:30 / 18:30

HISTORY OF SCIENCE

“Mapping Time and Space – The First Ancient Astronomers”

by Professor Eshbal Ratzon, Tel Aviv University, Israel (in person)

Sharing Community Knowledge 1

9:30 / 16:30 / 19:30

ISLAMIC TRADITIONS

“Astronomical Observations in Rural Palestine – Two Generations Ago”

by Ahmad Hroub, University of Aberdeen External Research Collaborator, Palestine (in-person / online)

Refreshment Break

10:15 / 17:15 / 20:15

Keynote Lecture 2: Dark Skies Today

10:45 / 17:45 / 20:45

ASTRONOMY

“Did you Know the Stars are Disappearing?”

– What the world is losing as a result of the overuse of light at night”

by Dr Philip Langill, University of Calgary, Canada (online)

Sharing Community Knowledge 2

11:45 / 18:45 / 21:45

INDIGENOUS SCIENCE

“Reconnecting with the Sky Ancestors”

by Dr Kori Czuy, Director/Senior Advisor at TELUS Spark Science Centre & Host/Director of the Indigenous Science podcast “Ancestral Science” (online)

Panel discussion with Q&A

12:30 / 19:30 / 22:30

“Dark Skies in the Past and Today”

II. DELVING INTO DARK SKIES

Monday, 29 June

Sir Duncan Rice Library, Seminar Room 224

Session 1: Undarkened Skies – Impact Below & Above

4:00 / 11:00 / 14:00

BIOLOGY

“The Need for Darkness – The effects of light pollution on nature”

by Dr Martin Barker, University of Aberdeen (in person)

4:30 / 11:30 / 14:30

ASTRONOMY

“Dark Skies Then and Now: The Impact of Light Pollution on Meteor Observations”

by Eng. Maryam Essa Sharif, Sharjah Space and Astronomy Hub, University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (online)

Refreshment Break

5:00 / 12:00 / 15:00

Session 2: Dark Skies Illuminated – the Moon

5:30 / 12:30 / 15:30

JEWISH STUDIES

“The Moon in late antique Jewish Imagery”

by Professor Sacha Stern, University College London, UK (online)

6:00 / 13:00 / 16:00

SCOTTISH HISTORY

“Observations by Moonlight: The Midnight Excursions of William MacGillivray”

by William Vasiladiotis, PhD Candidate in History, University of Aberdeen (in person)

Refreshment Break (Buffet Lunch)

6:30 / 13:30 / 16:30

Session 3: Capturing Dark Skies in Literature & Art

7:30 / 14:30 / 17:30

ANCIENT JEWISH LITERATURE

“Night, Dawn, and Deliverance – Darkness Imagery in the David Traditions of the Books of Samuel and the Psalms”

by Michael Weinburg, Independent Scholar (PhD Bar-Ilan University), Arad, Israel (in-person / online)

8:00 / 15:00 / 18:00

CULTURAL HISTORY

“Between Heaven and Earth – The Aesthetics of the Night Sky in Chinese Art”

by Dr Phillip Grimberg, University of Heidelberg & Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany (in person)

Refreshment Break

8:30 / 15:30 / 18:30

Session 4: Embedding Dark Skies in Law and Policy

9:00 / 16:00 / 19:00

LAW

“Towards Justiciability of the Right to Dark Skies”

by Emma Krajewska, Master of Law (Justice & Human Rights) Postgraduate Student, University of Aberdeen (in person)

9:30 / 16:30 / 19:30

ASTRONOMY

“Dark Sky Protection in Practice – Implementing Standards for Observational Environments and Advancing Regional Chapter Development”

by Ammar Eisa, Sharjah Space and Astronomy Hub, University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (online)

Refreshment Break

10:00 / 17:00 / 20:00

Session 5: Sciences & the Humanities in the Service of Dark Skies

10:30 / 17:30 / 20:30

ASTRONOMY

“Getting Around Light Pollution? Can we use modern technology to reclaim the stars?”

by Dr Philip Langill, University of Calgary, Canada (online)

11:00 / 18:00 / 21:00

DISCUSSION

”Multidisciplinary Approaches to Dark Skies”

III. ENGAGING WITH DARK SKIES

Tuesday, 30 June

Main venue: Sir Duncan Rice Library, 7th Floor, Craig Suite

We are joined by students from Harlaw Academy (Aberdeen), in the company of their teachers, Adrian McKinney and Ross McKenzie.

Session 1: Brightened Skies – the Sun & the Aurora

2:00 / 9:00 / 12:00

HISTORY OF SCIENCE

“Where is the Sun at night? Heavenly Abode of Luminaries in Ancient Near Eastern Literature”

by Professor Eshbal Ratzon, Tel Aviv University, Israel (in person)

2:30 / 9:30 / 12:30

ART HISTORY

“Kaleidoscopic Horizons – Painting the Aurora Borealis”

by Dr Isabelle Gapp, University of Aberdeen (in person)

3:00 / 10:00 / 13:00

PRACTICAL ASTRONOMY

“Gazing at the Sun over the Sea and Earth”

Telescope Observations from the top floor of the Library, facilitated by the Aberdeen Astronomical Society (Christine V. Macmillan with Colleagues) (in person)

Refreshment Break

4:00 / 11:00 / 14:00

Session 2: Pre-Modern & Early-modern Insights into/from Dark Skies

4:30 / 11:30 / 14:30

ANCIENT HISTORY

“A glimmer of darkness and traverse into the light”

by Dr Sam Newington, University of Aberdeen (in person)

5:00 / 12:00 / 15:00

PRESENTATIONS

“Ancient Religion and Dark Skies”

“Mysteries of the Sky: Poetic Laments to a Time Before Light Pollution”

“Untitled”

by Harlaw Academy Students (in person)

6:00 / 13:00 / 16:00

SCOTTISH HISTORY

Old Aberdeen Walk

– ‘Oriented’ Buildings, Hidden Observatories, and an ancient Sundial

Refreshment Break (Buffet Lunch)

7:00 / 14:00 / 17:00

Session 3: Modern Insights into/from Dark Skies

8:00 / 15:00 / 18:00

MEDICINE

“Out of Sync – How Modern Life Disrupts Your Body Clock”

by Dr Brendan Gabriel, University of Aberdeen (in person)

8:30 / 15:30 / 18:30

PRESENTATIONS

“Medical Science & The Importance of Stars in Human Wellbeing”

“Reflections of Lost Stars”

by Harlaw Academy Students (in person)

Refreshment Break

9:15 / 16:15 / 19:15

Session 4: Seeing & Hearing Dark Skies

9:45 / 16:45 / 19:45

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

“Britain’s Most Northerly Dark Sky Park, The Story So Far”

by Sam Robinson, Secretary of the Cairngorms Astronomy Group, Glenlivet and Tomintoul, UK (in person)

We will now change the venue to the Lecture Theatre in the Regent Building.

10:30 / 17:30 / 20:30

ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

“Ancient Skies Through Modern Eyes – Sharjah Space and Astronomy Hub (SSAH) as a Platform for Research, Education, and Public Engagement”

by Noora Alameri, Sharjah Space and Astronomy Hub, University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (online)

11:00 / 18:00 / 21:00

PRACTICAL ASTRONOMY

“Navigating Dark Skies in Space & Time – Introduction to Digital Simulations”

facilitated by Christine V. Macmillan (Aberdeen Astronomical Society) (in person)

We will now change the venue to the Divinity Library in King’s College.

12:00 / 19:00 / 22:00

QURANIC RECITATION

“The Sound of Dark Skies – Celestial Phenomena in the Quran”

presented & performed by Mohammed Ali al-Sallami, Alumnus of the Holy Quran Institute in Najaf, Iraq, and MSc in Advanced Structural Engineering Postgraduate Student, University of Aberdeen (in person)

Concluding Remarks

12:30 / 19:30 / 22:30

by Professor Joachim Schaper, Divinity Director of Research, University of Aberdeen (in person)

15:00 / 22:00 / 1:00 (departure) & 17:30 / 00:30 / 3:30 (return)

TRIP TO ABERDEENSHIRE (TBC)

“The Midsummer Full-Moon-Rise

– A trip to the East Aquhorthies Stone Circle”

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Organiser

Dr Jakub Zbrzeźny

Lecturer in Second Temple Judaism

Divinity Department

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Assisted by Wilhelm Wildner & Duncan Jackson

(Student Society Biblical Antiquity in Science and History, University of Aberdeen)

Workshop Website & Registration Link

See <https://dark-skies-exploration.github.io/>

Last update: June 18, 2026.