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From Stone Age to Space Age
— Astronomy & World Heritage Thematic Study released

Paris, 3 August 2010: The UNESCO World Heritage Committee, at its 34th session in Brasilia, Brazil, has for the first time endorsed a study into a field of science heritage. The thematic study on the Heritage Sites of Astronomy and Archaeoastronomy, prepared within the framework of the International Year of Astronomy 2009, presents an overall vision of astronomical heritage and attempts to identify some of the most outstanding examples which are of significance to all humankind.

The study is the result of cooperation between the IAU Working Group on Astronomy and World Heritage and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the advisory body to UNESCO regarding cultural sites. The two organisations worked together to produce a detailed account of the rich history of astronomy around the world and the key sites for this heritage. The document, the full title of which is "Heritage Sites of Astronomy and Archaeoastronomy in the context of the World Heritage Convention", identifies broad issues in the assessment of cultural heritage relating to astronomy and includes examples of historical sites, some already on the World Heritage List or national Tentative Lists. This study was an integral part of the successful International Year of Astronomy 2009, whose activities in 148 countries reached millions of people and increased public understanding and appreciation of astronomy around the world.

The study has several objectives. One is to gain a clearer picture of the character and composition of astronomical heritage around the world. Another is to identify just how to define this type of heritage in the context of the World Heritage Convention. The report details the main characteristics we should expect from an astronomical heritage site, and compares this to a representative sample of major heritage sites for astronomy around the world.

Sixteen main areas are identified in the report, spanning all of human history from the Stone Age to space heritage.

"Astronomy represents a rich and significant part of humanity's shared cultural and natural heritage. Recognising this formally means that we can now identify and clarify astronomical value in the context of the World Heritage Convention," says Clive Ruggles, chair of the IAU's Working Group on Astronomy and World Heritage and co-author of the study.

Anna Sidorenko-Dulom, Chair of the International Year of Astronomy 2009 Cornerstone project Astronomy and World Heritage and coordinator of the thematic initiative Astronomy and World Heritage at UNESCO World Heritage Centre adds: "*Recently there has been a lot of interest in reviewing the relationship between the heritage of the sciences, the traditional knowledge of indigenous communities, and the World Heritage Convention. In this context, the new Thematic*

Study provides the foundation for assisting State Parties to harmonise their Tentative Lists at a thematic level and to prepare nominations, including comparative analyses explaining the importance of nominated properties in their national and international context. This raises serious possibilities of inscribing astronomical sites of outstanding universal value on to the World Heritage List."

The study therefore has important practical implications for the effective implementation of the World Heritage Convention and for helping state parties create credible nomination dossiers. But as well as its practical benefits for the management of world heritage, the study is a useful tool for helping to understand humanity's history.

"*This document proposes valuable new concepts for heritage, combines different categories of cultural heritage in previously unexplored ways, and highlights hitherto unrecognised links between cultural and natural heritage,* " says Michel Cotte, co-author of the study and ICOMOS advisor. *"We believe that the vision arising from this study is applicable beyond astronomy to the history of science more broadly. This will be to the lasting benefit of the whole of science and technology heritage".*

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Notes

The ICOMOS-IAU Thematic Study (ISBN 978-2-918086-01-7) is downloadable for free from the website of the IAU's Working Group on Astronomy and World Heritage: http://www.astronomicalheritage.org

The document "Heritage Sites of Astronomy and Archaeoastronomy in the context of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention: A Thematic Study", was coordinated and written by Clive Ruggles and Michel Cotte with contributions by Margaret Austin, Juan Belmonte, Amanda Chadburn, Von Del Chamberlain, David DeVorkin, Eduardo Fayos-Solá, Danielle Fauque, Ivan Ghezzi, Ian Glass, He Nu, John Hearnshaw, Tofigh Heidarzadeh, Rebekah Higgitt, Jarita Holbrook, Manuela Incerti, Stanisław Iwaniszewski, Subhash Kak, Stéphane Le Gars, Stephen McCluskey, Giulio Magli, Cipriano Marín, Mikhail Marov, Ricardo Moyano, Casiana Muñoz-Tuñón, William Breen Murray, Efthymios Nicolaidis, Ray Norris, Park Jeong Eun, Juan Pérez Arencibia, Michael Rappenglück, Angel Rodriguez, Shi Yun-li, Malcolm Smith, John Steele, Richard Wainscoat, Richard Wielebinski, Tom Wilson, Gudrun Wolfschmidt, Günther Wuchterl, Michael Wright and Xu Fengxian.

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The IAU is the international astronomical organisation that brings together almost 10,000 distinguished astronomers from all nations of the world. Its mission is to promote and safeguard the science of astronomy in all its aspects through international cooperation. The IAU also serves as the internationally recognised authority for assigning designations to celestial bodies and the surface features on them. Founded in 1919, the IAU is the world's largest professional body for astronomers.

Links

- ICOMOS–IAU Thematic Study: (ISBN 978-2-918086-01-7): http://www.astronomy2009.org/resources/documents/
- IAU's Working Group on Astronomy and World Heritage: http://www.astronomicalheritage.org
- UNESCO's Astronomy and World Heritage Initiative: http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/19

- ICOMOS Thematic Studies: http://www.icomos.org/studies
- 34th Session of the World Heritage Committee website: http://www.34whc.brasilia2010.org.br/
- International Year of Astronomy 2009 website: http://www.astronomy2009.org

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Image

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One of mankind's manifestations of astronomy
One of the 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, 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)