

Hyades and Pleiades as a kind of “clock” in the astronomy of archaic cultures – The function and representation of these open clusters in prehistoric and proto- historic time as well as among indigenous people

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Since prehistoric and protohistoric time and all over the world most notably the Pleiades and to a less degree the Hyades had attracted great attention among the people. They were deeply impressed by the small twinkling cluster of the Pleiades and the more widespread scattered bunch of the Hyades. In particular the Pleiades were important in archaic cultures. Since Paleolithic time people had been aware of the time of invisibility of the Pleiades and their certain star phases during the course of the year. They also noticed that the moon and the planets always were running very close to that cluster, below or above, and sometimes even crossing it. In the case of the moon the occultation of the Pleiades, which happens from time to time, was another eye-catching event for ancient stargazers. People used the periodicity of some of these astronomical phenomena related to the Pleiades as a kind of a celestial “clock” to correlate other rhythms in nature and society, in particular biological, meteorological, and social events. The Pleiades also played an important role in the conceptions of early calendars or for the purposes of orientation and navigation.

The talk first gives an overview about the main astronomical phenomena linked to the Pleiades (and Hyades). Then selected myths and rituals known from indigenous people concerning these open clusters are reported, analyzed, and categorized. Finally some examples for the symbolic representation of the Pleiades and the Hyades on different substrates, at special places, and in particular relation, will be shown, starting with ethnographic records and going back through protohistoric and prehistoric epochs down from the Bronze Age (e. g. Nebra Disk) to Neolithic and Paleolithic time (e. g. Çatal Hüyük, Cave of Lascaux, La Tête-du-Lion).