

Foreword: The Origin of the INSAP Meetings

Rolf Sinclair

In the summer of 1993, on a Sunday morning in Tucson, an idea for a conference on the Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena first came about through a chance meeting between George Coyne, Ray White, and myself. George was then the director of the Vatican Observatory, the *Specola Vaticana*. The Specola headquarters were in the Vatican City State at Castel Gandolfo outside Rome, but George and his staff spent half of each year at the Department of Astronomy of the University of Arizona. Ray was then a Professor in that Department, and I was then a Programme Director at the National Science Foundation.

Both Ray and I were interested in archaeoastronomy, and I was staying in Tucson with him to plan a meeting in that field. We had settled on holding the meeting in Santa Fe a few years later. The archaeoastronomy meeting that Ray and I were planning, and which led to the idea of INSAP, was held independently in Santa Fe in 1996. As we made decisions about the scope and content of that meeting a new idea occurred to us. This was to plan a gathering that would not focus entirely on archaeoastronomy, which is defined as the evidence that early cultures had developed and used their own observational techniques and astronomically-based calendars. This new idea for a meeting would discuss how people through millennia had responded to and often used astronomical phenomena creatively in their own cultures. It would be a uniquely interdisciplinary meeting, very likely the first of its kind.

But how should we organize and run such a meeting? Ray called George and asked him to join us to give advice. George arrived on his bicycle a few minutes later and we discussed our idea. Our first thought was to name our meeting 'The Influence of Astronomical Phenomena on History', and that such a meeting could be in Santa Fe, New Mexico. George considered this, and said he found the idea interesting and that such a meeting could be included in the Specola's program of public outreach.

Rolf Sinclair, 'Foreword: The Origin of the INSAP Meetings', *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 27 no. 1, Spring/Summer 2023, pp.3-4.

www.CultureAndCosmos.org

4 Foreword: The Origin of the INSAP Meetings

This gave life to the idea that Ray and I had considered, and the three of us started to make definite plans, but George suggested two changes. First, that the meeting be held at Castel Gandolfo, in the hills overlooking Rome. Much as we liked Santa Fe for such occasions, we realized that George had trumped our ace and agreed happily. Then he suggested that the title be changed to ‘The Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena’. We agreed with that also, because the title gave a broader meaning to the meeting. So with gratitude to George, we had a better theme for the meeting and INSAP was born.

With George’s support for accommodations and logistics, we were able to hold the INSAP meeting the next year, in the summer of 1994. Its success led to a second meeting in Malta in 1999, with partial support from the Specola Vaticana. This was called INSAPII. The third INSAP gathering was held in Palermo in 2000, and the series was under way generating wider interest, finding its audience, and with further meetings to come.



Fig. 1. G. Coyne, R. White, and R. Sinclair (L. to R.) at the Vatican Observatory at Castel Gondolfo, 1994. Photo by Liz Sinclair.