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Editorial

There have been three recent significant developments in higher education concerning the study of astronomy in culture. First was the promotion on 1 October 1999 of Clive Ruggles to a chair at Leicester University, England, under the title Professor of Archaeoastronomy. From the publication of his first book, *Astronomy and Society*, in 1981 to his most recent, *Astronomy in Prehistoric Britain and Ireland* in 1999, Clive has become one of the most influential voices in the small but growing world of academic archaeoastronomy. *Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy News*, no 33, looked at the implications for archaeoastronomy:

The majority of people doing groundbreaking work in archaeoastronomy and ethnoastronomy will have found themselves breaching disciplinary boundaries in earnest. All will have been through the process of confronting their own ignorance, and will have had to work swiftly to achieve an acceptable level of discourse with previously undiscovered sets of academic peers. This is difficult enough for an established academic, but consider the problems facing potential students. A student wishing to train seriously for a research career in archaeoastronomy needs a broad-based graduate program that imparts a balanced interdisciplinary view. The lack of suitable opportunities at graduate level must surely be a major concern faced by archaeoastronomy. Clive's new position as Professor of Archaeoastronomy is a step towards answering this concern.

The second development is the proposed creation of a research group in astrological studies in the Department of Social Work Studies at Southampton University, England, under the direction of Professor Chris Bagley. Although a handful of doctorates have been awarded over the last few decades for research into astrology, these have been almost entirely historical, aside from a few statistical studies. The new group is the first attempt to create a formal academic structure within which research into astrology might take place, and it is proposed that sociological and phenomenological approaches will be encouraged.

The third development was the creation of a chair in the ‘History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents’ in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam. The press release accompanying the advertisement for two lecturers/researchers in the history of esoteric currents in western culture from the Renaissance to the present set out the context for the new chair:

“Western esotericism” is understood in the technical academic sense of the word, as referring to a complex of interrelated currents that have existed in western society from the early modern period up to the present day. Accordingly the field includes the revival of Hermeticism and the so-called “Occult Philosophy” in the early modern period and its later developments; Alchemy, Paracelsianism and Rosicrucianism; Christian and post-Christian kabbalah; Theosophical and Illuminist currents; and various occultist and related developments during the 19th and 20th centuries, including the New Age movement.

Western Esoteric currents have played – and continued to play – a significant role in the religious landscape of the modern west, but have tended to be neglected by academic research. The new institution in Amsterdam combines the world’s second university chair in this field with the first initiative for a complete research group and the development of a standard academic teaching curriculum. In this context the history of western esotericism will be taught from an empirico-historical (religiously neutral) and interdisciplinary perspective, and with special attention to the complex nature of the relation between these currents and processes of modernization, rationalization and secularization...To date there exists a widespread tendency to perceive “esoteric” or “occultist” traditions as inherently anti-modern, since they espouse “mystical” or “irrational” attitudes that are considered incompatible with rationality and science. This tendency is closely connected to the idea that such traditions are essentially static and conservative, in contrast to the dynamic and progressive nature of modernity. Recent research demonstrates such assumptions to be over-simplistic and incompatible with the evidence. During all the phases of modernity one finds, rather, a complex involvement of western esoteric currents with mainstream developments that are seen both as reflections of, and as contributions to, the emergence of the modern world.