

INSAPXII Corfu 2024: Thirty Years of Astronomy, Art and Inspiration

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It is with great pleasure that I present these introductory comments to the Proceedings of the *Twelfth Conference on the Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena*, held at the Ionian University in Corfu, Greece, 20-24 May 2024. I was delighted to have welcomed delegates to the event, and now to welcome readers to these proceedings.

The Twelfth INSAP Conference marks thirty years and twelve conferences since the first one, held at the Castel Gandolfo, Rome in 1994, and we must begin with heartfelt thanks to the many people without whom this conference would simply not have happened. Firstly, immense thanks are due to the Rector of the Ionian University, Professor Andreas Floros, who first authored a proposal to host an INSAP conference in 2019, and has now allowed us to use his beautiful University and the wonderful auditorium and rooms of the Ionian Academy for the INSAP meeting. Professor Konstantinos (Kostas) Vogklis, Data Scientist and Head of the Department of Tourism at the Ionian University, was responsible for all the Local Organisation and we owe him a huge debt of gratitude for the work he put in to ensuring that the conference was a success. Without Kostas, it simply would not have happened at all. He was ably supported by local colleagues, particularly members of the Corfiot Astronomical Society and its Head, Socrates Linardos, as well as Minas Pergantis of the Ionian University who provided a huge amount of technical support, including the website and registration systems. Mention must also be made of Dr Themis Dallas of the University of Thessaly, Volos, who first spoke to me about the idea of holding an INSAP conference in Greece at the INSAPX meeting in Santiago del Compostela, Spain, and then promoted the idea to colleagues and contacts in Corfu.

Members of the International Executive Committee played their part, offering support and advice, and refereeing all the proposals, especially Professor John Hatch (Western University, Ontario) who played a vital role as Vice Chair and manager of the INSAP website and distribution lists.

Valerie Shrimplin, 'INSAP XII Corfu: Thirty Years of Art and Inspiration', *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 29 no 1 and 2, Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter 2025 (Papers from the INSAPXII conference, Corfu, 2024), pp. 5-8.

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Apologies were received from several former INSAP attendees, including Professor Rolf Sinclair, who was unable to attend, and Professor Paul Murdin of the University of Cambridge, whose very generous donation supported the event.

However, as fittingly pointed out at previous conferences, there are three very special people I have not yet mentioned to whom the series of *Conferences on the Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena*, owes its very existence: Professor Ray White, Steward Observatory Arizona, Father George Coyne, Vatican Observatory and Professor Rolf Sinclair, then at the US National Science Foundation. Originally the brainchild of these three colleagues, the series was based on their discussions about the influence of Astronomy and Cosmology on the Arts and culture, and the need to bring members of different disciplines in the sciences and humanities together for fruitful interactions. Their key theme was inspired by a quotation by Emerson, which demonstrates the effect of the glorious spectacles seen in the sky on humanity and human culture:

*If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years,
how would men believe and adore! ... But every night
come out these envoys of beauty and light the universe
with their admonishing smile.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1836¹

I was pleased to show, at the conference, a few slides taken from earlier conferences, ranging from Malta (1999), Oxford (2003) and Bath (2010) to Gresham College (2015), New York and Pasadena (2013 and 2022). The images demonstrated the variety of presentations and activities that make up each INSAP Conference, including formal academic lectures in historic venues, and visits to places of astronomical interest, as well as enjoyable informal discussions and dinners. The conferences have embraced an immense variety of topics - from the phenomenon of Stonehenge to that of Manhattanhenge, as highlighted in the New York meeting in 2013. And the rest is, as they say, history.

The twelfth conference was agreed to have been a huge success. It even embraced the celebrations of Corfu's unification with mainland Greece in

¹From Ralph Waldo Emerson', *Nature*, 1836. The essay is available (and can be downloaded from) EmersonCentral.com, at: <https://emersoncentral.com/texts/nature-addresses-lectures/nature2/chapter1-nature/> [accessed 2 September 2025].

1863 (including parades and a fly past) as well as the full moon rising over the castle during a fun-filled outdoor conference dinner (Fig 1).



Fig. 1. Old Fortress Corfu Town (Photo: V Shrimplin, May 2024).

I would like, at this point, to note that I am stepping down as Chair of the Executive Committee. Professor John Hatch will be taking over as Chair with Professor Holly Henry as Vice Chair, whilst new Committee members are also in the process of being appointed at time of writing (see website for latest details). Volunteers for hosting a future INSAP meeting are always being sought and, happily, there have already been proposals for further conferences in the near future. In the meantime, I am wishing for a productive and enjoyable conference and set of proceedings.

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Following this short introduction to the conference, I took the opportunity to speak briefly on a Greek topic which, having lived in Greece for a total of about five years (1975-80), is dear to my heart. It is a long time since I first visited Corfu (on my way between Patras/Rion where I lived and England). In 2022, I was amazed to see the island of Corfu from the air as I was travelling back from Kenya. (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Corfu from the air (Photo: V Shrimplin, November 2022).

Lord Byron also lived in Greece for about five years - and my short piece on Byron's love for the 'Starry Skies of Greece' is included later in this volume. A famed English Romantic Poet, Byron took Greece and the Greek cause to his heart, with a profound and serious philhellenism based on a true and sincere love of Greece.

His admiration of the country's past heritage and hopes for the future are perhaps epitomized in his verses from *Don Juan*, Canto III, *The Isles of Greece* (appropriately enough, since we are on a Greek island for the conference):

The isles of Greece! The isles of Greece!
Where burning Sappho loved and sung,
Where grew the arts of war and peace, -
Where Delos rose, and Phoebus sprung!
Eternal summer gilds them yet,
But all, except their sun, is set.²

² *Don Juan*, Canto III, 86, 1–16, line 689ff. (dated 1819). See Lord Byron, *Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2008), pp. 509–512.