

From sky to space

Contributed by Daniel Marin
Tuesday, 01 June 2010
Last Updated Monday, 02 August 2010

The Milky Way - FUJII/C&E Photos

For many millenia, man has observed and measured, admired and feared a sky whose perpetual round of stars rythmed his life. In fact, imagining that the Earth and stars move in the same nearly infinite space has not been easy. Man had to abandon the then common perception that our planet was the centre of a sphere of fixed stars.

Â

Â

Circumpolar around the celestial south pole - AAO/C&E Photos

Since ancient Babylon, man surveyed a sky where the stars seemed to move around the Earth. According to his beliefs, it had the shape of a bell or a dome on which thousands of visible stars were inlaid, and the Milky Way was the path taken by dead souls to join heaven or was caused by milk

spilt from Hera's breast when Hercules was suckling. This geocentric vision of the world was shattered in 1543 by Copernicus's theories and finally collapsed when Galileo Galilei used a telescope to observe the sky, the first person to do so. The observation of spots on the Sun and of reliefs on the Moon, called into question the model composed of perfect spheres. Through the use of more and more powerful telescopes, the universe was populated with new cosmic bodies, such as galaxies whose true nature was only understood in the 1920s.