Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers

Greaves, John

Born Colemore, Hampshire, England, 1602

Died London, England, 8 October 1652

John Greaves was Savilian Professor of Astronomy at Oxford University and a noted antiquarian. He is especially notable for his interest in the astronomy of the ancients and in his efforts to preserve astronomical tables and manuscripts.

Greaves was the eldest son of the Reverend John Greaves, rector of Colemore in Hampshire, and the brother of Sir Edward Greaves (1608–1680), a physician, and of Thomas Greaves (1612–1676), an orientalist. He married in 1648 and died childless

Greaves entered Balliol College, Oxford, in 1617, graduating with a BA in 1621. He was then elected to a fellowship at Merton College in 1624, receiving his MA in 1628. Greaves had a great interest in natural philosophy and mathematics; learned Oriental languages; and studied ancient Greek, Arabian, and Persian astronomers as well as George Peurbach, Johann Müller (Regiomontanus), Nicolaus Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, and Johannes Kepler. In 1630, while he held his fellowship at Merton, he was chosen professor of geometry at Gresham College, London. Greaves held the chair from 1630 to 1643

In the late 1630s, Greaves traveled to Constantinople, Alexandria, and Cairo. He took measurements of several monuments and pyramids and collected Greek, Arabic, and Persian manuscripts. Greaves returned to England in 1640 and was chosen to succeed John Bainbridge as Savilian Professor of Astronomy at Oxford, but was deposed from his position at Gresham due to his absence. In 1642, he was appointed subwarden of Merton. On October 30, 1648, Greaves was expelled by parliamentary visitors from both his professorship and his fellowship on several grounds, including misappropriation of college property and favoritism in the appointment of subordinate college officers. At this time, he lost a large part of his books and manuscripts, some of which were recovered by a friend. Greaves retired to London, where he married. Before his death, he published several books and prepared several other manuscripts, some of which were published posthumously

In 1645, Greaves proposed a reform of the calendar by eliminating the bissextile day for the next 40 years, i.e., inserting the intercalary day every four years in the Julian Calendar, but his scheme was not adopted. His principal contributions to astronomy consist of his efforts to collect and publish astronomical tables from Arabic and Persian sources. He also collected astronomical instruments that were left by will to the Savilian Library at Oxford and presented in 1659 to the Savilian Observatory by his brother Nicholas in his memory. A list of these instruments was published in 1697. The list includes one astrolabe, three quadrants (one of them a mural quadrant made by Elias Allen), two sextants, three telescopes (one of which was 15 feet in length with three mirrors), a pendulum clock, a lined globe, and a cone cut to illustrate the formation of a parabola, hyperbola, and ellipse The instruments were probably used in the

observatory on the tower of the schools. During Greaves's tenure, Oxford was better equipped with instruments than Greenwich. Among his several works, the following deserve mention: *Pyramidologia* (1646), *A Discourse of the Roman Foot and Denarius* (1647), *Anonymus Persa de Siglis Arabum et Persarum Astronomicis* (1649), *Astronomica quaedam ex traditione Shah Cholgii Persae, una cum Hypothesibus Planetarum* (1650), *Lemmata Archimedis e vetusto codice manuscripto Arabico* (1659), *An Account of the Longitude and Latitude of Constantinople and Rhodes* (1705), and *Miscellaneous Works* edited with biography by Thomas Birch (1737). Through the reports of his journeys, Greaves seems to have been well known to members of the Royal Society, the nucleus of which was formed by a group of scientists who began meeting at Gresham College in 1645. Robert Hooke mentions him in passing in two comments, at least one of which is simultaneously appreciative and critical.

Greaves maintained an extensive correspondence with the learned men of his day, including Archbishop Ussher and William Harvey. His own contributions to geography and astronomy are minor, but he is emblematic of the scholarly interest of his day in mathematics, geography, and astronomy.

André Goddu

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