

Obituary: John P. Britton (1939-2010)

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Obituary: John P. Britton (1939–2010)

Alexander Jones

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Many promising young scholars leave the academic world soon after finishing their doctorates; few return years later to become authorities in their field. John Britton was educated at St. Paul's School (Concord, New Hampshire) and Yale University, where he earned a B.A. in physics and history and a Ph.D. in history of science, under the supervision of Asger Aaboe. One brief chapter of his dissertation, an astronomical study of the solar and lunar observation reports in Ptolemy's *Almagest*, appeared in *Centaurus* in 1969; but for more than twenty years this was his only published research. Immediately after taking his degree, Britton entered the investment management business. In the mid-1980s he began again to devote significant time to the history of ancient astronomy, and from 1987 on, he published more than twenty articles, at an accelerating pace, as well as a revision of his dissertation. When he died, suddenly and unexpectedly, of a cardiac arrest on June 8, 2010, he had at least a dozen projects underway. Britton never sought a conventional academic appointment, but at various times he held visiting appointments with the history of science departments of Yale and Harvard, the Dibner Institute at M.I.T., and the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at N.Y.U. His relations with colleagues were characterized by remarkable generosity, humor, and a willingness to consider new approaches even when they compelled him to reconsider his convictions.

Britton possessed a broad knowledge of the ancient exact sciences, but the area closest to his heart was the study of the relationship between observations and mathematical theories in ancient Babylonian astronomy and the impact of Babylonian astronomy on the Greeks. No part of this subject had more fascination for him than the evolution of the Babylonian lunar theories known as System A and System B,

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which were the first complex mathematical models devised to reproduce the behavior of observable phenomena involving multiple periodicities. His great project was to establish, within a rigorous historical and documentary framework, the possible routes by which unknown Babylonian scribes could have arrived at the often remarkably accurate numerical parameters and the combinations of arithmetical functions and algorithms comprising these systems. The preceding chapter, which had just reached the proof stage when Britton died, was to have been followed by chapters on the Babylonian treatment of solar anomaly, lunar latitude and eclipse magnitude, and lunar visibility.

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