

AMATEUR ASTRONOMY IN LITHUANIA

Arūnas Kučinskas
PO Box 2005
Vilnius 232012 Lithuania

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Abstract

Attempts to build activity in Lithuanian amateur astronomy are described.

There is a long tradition of astronomy in Lithuania. Archaeological, written, ethnological, and other sources demonstrate the breadth of astronomical knowledge that has existed in Lithuania since the Stone Age. According to historical sources, the first astronomical observatory in old Lithuania was the main temple at Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, built in 1285. However, no information about its activities survive.

The foundation of the Vilnius Astronomical Observatory at the University in 1753 was of great importance for Lithuanian astronomy. It remains one of the oldest scientific institutions of its type in Europe. Since that time, Lithuanian astronomers have actively studied the universe. In 1969 the first dome was built for the Molėtai Observatory, which has become a fairly large institution, housing a 0.35/0.51 m Maksutov camera as well as 0.63 m and 1.65 m reflecting telescopes. An observing station was built in Uzbekistan on Maidanak Hill. In 1975, the 0.48 m reflector was transferred there, and in 1981 a 1.0 m Ritchey-Cretien telescope came into operation.

Amateur astronomy in Lithuania is not well developed, considering the long astronomical tradition. The Lithuanian Astronomical Society (LAS) was only founded in 1978 and now has about 200 members. Unfortunately, it has not been an active society; there have been no working groups, meetings were held about once a year, circulars have been issued very rarely — if at all. In addition, there have been problems with such common things as atlases, variable-star charts, telescopes and their accessories, and even with blank discs and abrasives for telescope making. In May 1990 we had a meeting of LAS and it was decided to reorganize the activities of our society, but in fact nothing has changed so far.

Fortunately, we are not pessimists. Although our amateurs do not have a proper society, they continue to be active in small observing groups. The most popular directions of amateur astronomy in Lithuania are the observing of comets and variable stars, telescope making, and paleo-astronomy. The comet observing group is very active, with a strong interest in a search for new comets. Their leader, Dr. Kazimieras Černis, has discovered three new comets, one of them while he was still an amateur. Enthusiasts of paleo-astronomy guided by V. Šlapkauskas are active in organizing paleo-astronomical expeditions around Lithuania.

The Variable Star Observing Group is possibly the smallest one. We have only three members, and our yearly score is only about 1000 observations, which are regularly sent to AAVSO and AFOEV. We are very much indebted to the AAVSO and its Director, Janet. A. Mattei, for continuous kind attention to our activities.

We are planning to start distributing a special variable star group circular intended to raise interest in variable star observing amongst other amateur astronomers in Lithuania. However, publication has been delayed by troubles with photocopying. A special program has been started for introducing young amateurs to variable star observing.

Our usual equipment for variable star observing is binoculars, but some of our members also have larger instruments including 145/720 mm, 227/960 mm, and 227/1020 mm Newtonian telescopes. A special amateur astronomy center is being built in Molėtai Observatory, and in a year or two the 0.35/0.51 m Maksutov telescope will be transferred there to be used primarily for amateur purposes.

We realize that a raising of the old astronomical tradition in Lithuanian amateur astronomy is a big job; but, understanding the complexity of the situation we still feel enthusiastic and we hope that the time when you hear much more about amateur astronomy activities in Lithuania is not far away!