

on I expanded the dust studies to quasars and their intervening absorbers. At DARK, I not only moved from physics to astrophysics, but also learned enormously from my colleagues in various fields.

Even during my PhD, I did not limit myself to a narrow range of topics. I also worked on Damped Ly $\alpha$  Absorbers (DLAs), seen along the sightlines towards luminous quasars, to study their chemical and physical properties. DLAs, classified on the basis of their neutral hydrogen, are distant foreground galaxies usually faint and small (on the sky). I defended my thesis in April 2011 and continued working as a visitor at DARK for six months. I started my first postdoc at the Laboratoire d'Astrophysique de Marseille, France, working with Céline Péroux. There I ex-

panded my studies of intervening absorbers to a larger sample of DLAs and sub-DLAs, obtained from the UVES archive. I also started combining samples of GRBs and quasar absorbers to infer dust properties in distant diverse environments.

I left sunny Marseille, to commence my current ESO fellowship in Garching during late 2013. The fellowship not only gives us independence scientifically, but also provides the opportunity to perform functional duties at amazing ESO sites. Since I have mostly used VLT data during my career path, I therefore picked my duties to be at the driest place on Earth, Paranal Observatory. During my PhD, I went to the Nordic Optical Telescope, La Palma, Spain, for two weeks for a summer observing school. Now ESO has given me opportunities to observe with its powerful

facilities. During my first year I provided both day- and night-time support mainly for Unit Telescope 3 (UT3), and now I have switched to UT2. I adore the environment at Paranal, and every visit there is a great experience, where I not only perform service mode observations, but also learn to deal with specific technical issues.

The beauty of astronomy is that we are billions beneath the starry sky but when we peer out, we see one single player, the Universe. I love doing research in astrophysics, starting from general chemical and physical properties and putting them in context of a global picture. I am looking forward to the powerful European Extremely Large Telescope, which will target many more hidden mysteries of the obscured Universe.

## Staff at ESO

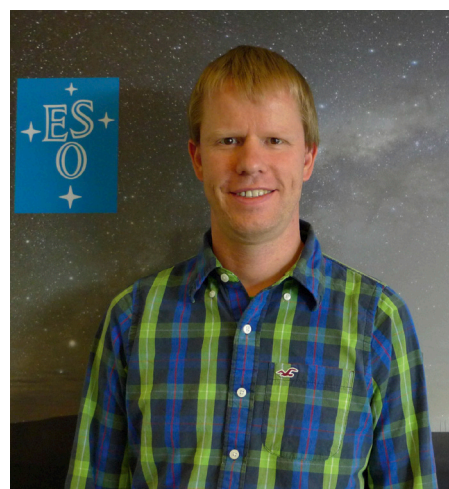
### Konrad Tristram

To be honest right from the start: it was never my childhood dream to become an astrophysicist. I had totally different ideas of what I would like to become as a small boy: medical doctor, shopkeeper, bank clerk, tram driver. At some point, I even wanted to become a waste collector because they wore such nice orange suits. Rather, the path towards becoming an astrophysicist just laid itself out in front of me with time, especially during my studies at university.

My first notable contact with astronomy was during my last year at school when I picked astronomy as an optional course. I excelled at the astrophysical part. Learning the names of stars and constellations, on the other hand, was not my calling. Fortunately it turned out that this was not an important part of the course and I nevertheless got full marks. In fact, I remember standing out in the fields not

far from my parents' house identifying constellations and trying to learn by heart the names of their most important stars. Even today my orientation on the night sky is limited. For example, it took me about a year to find out that one of the galaxies I was working on for my PhD, the Circinus galaxy, was in fact called like that because it was the galaxy in the small southern constellation of Circinus, the Compass.

I started studying physics in the north German town of Rostock on the Baltic Sea. There I enjoyed the friendly atmosphere of the physics department, the good ratio of professors to students and above all the possibility to learn for exams on the beach. However, the choice of courses for specialisation was limited and upon receiving my Vordiplom I moved to Heidelberg, in order to have a larger field of options for research. At that time I was still dreaming of saving the world by contributing to physics with a practical



Konrad Tristram

use, for example by working on fusion power. However the group doing that at Heidelberg closed. "Fortunately" I must say from my current point of view.

When discussing options for a diploma thesis with professors, one of them suggested trying an internship at the Max Planck Institute for Astronomy (MPIA) up on the Königstuhl mountain. He assured me that astronomy was a promising field of research, in contrast to particle physics where the soon-to-be-expected discovery of the Higgs particle would lead to the conclusion that everything is more or less understood. I had already taken courses and practicals for astronomy as part of my curriculum with great interest and I was well prepared for a deeper experience in astrophysics. So I ended up at the MPIA for an internship, which then later turned into a diploma thesis under the supervision of Almudena Prieto and Hans-Walter Rix.

During my work for the diploma thesis, I started using the 70-centimetre KING telescope at the MPIA with great joy, in that sense my first observing experience. “Old school” as one would say now, sitting in the dark directly next to the telescope, counting the seconds until the exposure finished. With freezing hands and shivering in the winter. My interest in observing must have also come to the attention of my supervisors, because it did not take long before the first opportu-

nity arrived to get some “real” observing experience. Towards the second half of my diploma thesis, Hans-Walter Rix came into my office asking, on a normal Tuesday: “Do you want to go observing in Chile on Friday?” I was so astonished that it probably took me several minutes to speak a coherent sentence. An observing run had been changed from Service to Visitor Mode at short notice and, because everyone was busy, they were looking for an observer. It didn’t take too long for me to decide: on that Friday I was on my way to Chile for observations with SOFI at the NTT, my first contact with ESO and with Chile.

I still clearly remember Emanuela Pompei being my first support astronomer. I wouldn’t have imagined at that time that we would become colleagues now. Interestingly, this first trip remains my only observing trip to La Silla. From my second observing trip on, during my PhD thesis, I became a regular visitor to Paranal. It was the second observing run that sparked my interest not only in observations with the Very Large Telescope, but also in the country of Chile itself. I went observing together with Almudena Prieto and she strongly suggested that I should stay a few days longer to visit San Pedro de

Atacama. This first non-astronomical activity, as well as many subsequent ones, led me to get in contact with Chileans and to appreciate this country very much.

During my PhD, I specialised in studying the warm dust distributions around active galactic nuclei at the highest spatial resolution, mainly by infrared interferometry. After obtaining my degree from the University of Heidelberg I moved to the infrared interferometry group of Gerd Weigelt in Bonn, where I could continue and expand my research. Visits to Paranal deepened my connection with this observatory and I got to know my future colleagues more closely. My desire to work at this unique observatory grew over several years, but was brought to the point by the conclusion that observing was always the most fun part of my work as an astronomer. Also I grew more and more fond of Chile, the more I got to know it.

Now my wish has finally come true and I have started with an assignment as support astronomer at the VLT Interferometer. Exciting times are ahead of us with the arrival of the second-generation interferometric instruments and I am eagerly looking forward to the new possibilities these instruments will offer.



A busy night scene in January 2015 at La Silla taken from the 3.6-metre dome looking west to the Panamericana Highway (the source of all the light pollution). Comet Lovejoy is visible in the centre of the image, and the Pleiades open cluster (M45) and the California Nebula (NGC 1499) to the north (right). See Picture of the Week potw1504 for more details.

P. Horálek/ESO