
A Brief History of Ancient Astrology

Roger Beck



A Brief History of Ancient Astrology

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For Janet

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
1 Introduction. What Was Astrology in Ancient Greece and Rome?	1
2 Origins and Types of Astrology. The Transfer of Astrology from Babylon. The Pseudo-History of Astrology: “Alien Wisdom”	9
3 The Product: How to Construct a Simple Horoscope, Ancient Style	20
4 Structure and Meaning in the Horoscope, 1: The Aspects and the “Places”	38
5 Structure and Meaning in the Horoscope, 2: The Zodiac and its Signs	50

CONTENTS

6	Structure and Meaning in the Horoscope, 3: The Planets	70
7	Horoscopes and Their Interpretation	91
8	A Matter of Life and Death: “Starters,” “Destroyers,” and “Length of Life.” Some Sociopolitical Implications of Astrology	119
9	Conclusion: Why Bother with Ancient Astrology in the Twenty-First Century?	132
	<i>Notes</i>	137
	<i>References</i>	150
	<i>Index</i>	155

Figures

3.1	The circle of the zodiac and the aspects	21
3.2	The four “centers”	29
3.3	Oscillation of midheaven and lower midheaven	32
3.4	The astronomical elements of horoscope N&VH no. –3	36
4.1	The circle of the twelve places	43
5.1	The ecliptic, the signs of the zodiac, and the celestial equator	51
7.1	The horoscope of Ceionius Rificus Albinus	96
7.2	The horoscope of Islam (N&VH no. L621)	112
8.1	A horoscope of January 21, 72 BCE (N&VH no. L–71)	122
8.2	The horoscope of the emperor Hadrian (N&VH no. L76)	124

Tables

4.1	The fixed circle of the twelve astrological “places”	46
6.1	The seven planets	72
6.2	The “houses,” “exaltations,” and “humiliations” of the planets	85
7.1	The horoscopes of six men involved together in a crisis at sea (Vettius Valens, <i>Anthologies</i> 7.6)	104

Preface

In setting out to write “a brief history of ancient astrology” I am in effect making four initial commitments. The first, brevity, will be easy enough to meet; and if I do not meet it myself, my editors will meet it for me. The third and fourth, defining the book’s subject matter, “ancient astrology,” are not very difficult either. “Antiquity,” for our purposes, spans roughly the last century BCE and the first four centuries CE. *Classical* antiquity is intended: that is, the culture – or cultures – of the Mediterranean basin and Europe west of the Rhine and south of the Danube in the period indicated. Politically, that vast area was unified under Roman rule; culturally, it was diverse, but the predominant form was Greek, as was the language in which cultural forms were communicated. Thus “ancient astrology” means essentially “Greek astrology,” although most of its practitioners and clients were not Greeks in any meaningful ethnic sense. Rome’s empire, to its credit, was multi-ethnic and multi-cultural.

The problematic commitment is the second, offering a “history” of ancient astrology. Certainly one can construct narratives about aspects of ancient astrology. One can tell, in chronological sequence, the story of astrology’s reception in its host culture, particularly in official Rome where episodes of exclusion alternated with periods of grudging

acceptance and unofficial toleration. In fact this story has been told – and well told – by F. H. Cramer in *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (1954). Similarly, because horoscopes are datable, one can display and comment on the extant examples in chronological order as did O. Neugebauer and H. B. Van Hoesen in their magisterial compilation *Greek Horoscopes* (1959). Again, one can survey the extant astrological literature and trace the author-to-author flow of influence, as the Gundels did in their *Astrologumena* (1966). But to write a comprehensive history of ancient astrology as an art or technique that developed in a meaningful way over time would be a dubious undertaking. Changes no doubt occurred, though astrology was an unusually conservative art and indeed is still much the same today as it was in antiquity. But meaningful development implies progress, and by what standard can we measure progress in a pseudo-science? Overall, then, there is no satisfying narrative of ancient astrology to be told. There is simply no parallel to the story of the progressive mathematical refinement and enhanced predictive power of ancient astronomy.

Consequently, my “history” of ancient astrology will actually be something less ambitious, more in the nature of an *account* of various aspects of the subject, treated synchronically except where there is a tale to be told diachronically.

I have centered my account on the system itself, how horoscopes were constructed and interpreted. I have also chosen to dwell on actual examples, real horoscopes given and in some instances analyzed post-mortem by the ancient experts themselves. Overall I have chosen depth and detail of example over breadth of coverage. To be comprehensive in the space allowed would be impossible, and the attempt at it would lead only to the superficial and uninteresting.

Inevitably scant justice or none at all will be done to some topics of secondary importance. The only one I need mention here is the ancient philosophical debate, focused mainly on the issue of fatalism, about astrology’s value and validity. However, since this topic has been well handled by others, notably by A. A. Long in his article “Astrology: Arguments pro and contra” (1982), it will not be missed here.

PREFACE

Why would one devote a book to an account of a pseudo-science, long since invalidated? That is a question I should answer at the end of my presentation rather than the beginning. I shall however indicate as we go along some of the reasons why I think “just a pseudo-science” is a wholly inadequate characterization of ancient astrology.

1

Introduction. What Was Astrology in Ancient Greece and Rome?

1 Ancient Astronomy Versus Ancient Astrology: Some Misunderstandings

Modern studies of ancient astronomy and astrology tend to accentuate a dichotomy between the astronomy of antiquity as an emerging science and its astrology as a superstition whose only historic value was that it furnished a motive for investigating celestial regularities.

It is true that astrology, in the form in which it developed historically, could not have done so unaided by mathematical astronomy. To predict earthly “outcomes,” as in a natal horoscope, one must know the positions of the stars and planets relative to each other and to the local horizon of the subject at the time of birth. Direct observation is obviously insufficient – births in daytime, cloud cover, phenomena below the horizon, unavailability of an astrologically qualified observer, and so on – and it was in fact seldom if ever used. Accordingly, ancient astrologers, like their modern successors, worked with tables, and the better the tables, the more accurate, so it seemed to the astrologers,

must be their astrological predictions. It was of course the astronomers, or the astrologers themselves qua astronomers, who developed the mathematical models from which accurate tables, notably tables of planetary (including solar and lunar) longitudes, could be generated.

The history of science, precisely because its remit is the historic development of the scientific method and mentality, quite properly treats ancient astrology as a stage which astronomy outgrew, a necessary stage perhaps, but in the longer term an embarrassment to be discarded. While I will of course respect the scientific distinction between astronomical fact and astrological fantasy, I will not be overly concerned with it. As a historian of astrology my remit is cultural and intellectual history, in particular how the Greeks and Romans searched for meaning and significance in the phenomena of the visible heavens. I do not deny that the significance sought in the astrological domain was entirely non-scientific. But within my frame of reference, that is not a very interesting fact: astrological predictions don't work; *quid novi*, so what else is new?

The dichotomizing paradigm of the history of science (astronomy good, astrology bad) has hampered the study of ancient astrology in three unfortunate ways.¹ Firstly, in its disdain for astrology and astrologers the dominant modern paradigm trivializes the object of study, seldom a healthy or fruitful approach. If superstition is all you expect to find, superstition is probably all you will in fact find. The ancient astrological handbooks do indeed contain, from the scientific perspective, vast reams of nonsense. However, the mentality behind this nonsense was by no means unsubtle and unsophisticated; and in any case constructs of empirical nonsense are not infrequently among the more interesting products of human culture. My quarrel is not with the history of science in its proper domain but with triumphalist scientism rampant beyond it.

Secondly, the modern approach takes little account of the dominant ancient paradigm, well exemplified in the introductions to Ptolemy's astronomical and astrological treatises (respectively, the *Almagest* and the *Tetrabiblos*), which treated the two disciplines as a single predictive enterprise, of greater or lesser certitude, searching for regularities and significance in the motions and positions of the celestial bodies. The

modern scientist is not of course constrained by ancient paradigms, but the historian of the ancient mentality most certainly is – constrained by, though not confined to.

Thirdly and most insidiously, the modern dichotomizing approach, in separating astronomical gold from astrological slag, treats the “slag” too uniformly as consisting entirely of technical, predictive astrology. This approach is understandable, for the extant astrological literature and horoscopes are almost all oriented to that end: human “outcomes” predicted on the basis of celestial configurations. Nevertheless, there is some warrant in the ancient data for extending the working definition of astrology to include the search for metaphysical and theological meaning in the stars. Much of the data lies in astral symbolism within religious contexts, in particular data from the Mysteries of Mithras, a cult whose astronomy and astrology have long been at the focus of my research (Beck 2004, 2006). A recognition of ancient astrology’s wider domain and significance is one of my major goals. Accordingly, I intend this book as a contribution to the cultural and intellectual history of classical antiquity, not just a self-contained history of the art and practice of astrology over a certain time period.

2 Demarcation: Ptolemy on the Remits of Astronomy and Astrology

Did the ancients themselves, specifically the Greeks, distinguish between two different approaches to celestial phenomena, an astronomical approach and an astrological approach, as we would term them? Yes, they did, and many of them did so on commonsensical criteria which we still apply today: the predictions of astronomers can be trusted; those of astrologers, when you can pin them down, cannot be.

Notice that I do not speak of a discrimination between the true and the false, the real and the unreal, the scientific and the unscientific, between facts which are empirically verifiable and unverifiable nonsense. To do so would beg all sorts of questions, principally about the nature of “science” and the paradigms of it which successive ages hold

implicitly or explicitly. So rather than treating “scientific” astronomy as an unvarying given and characterizing astrology simply as an aberration there from, let us also ask some questions about astronomy in classical antiquity, in particular how its own practitioners construed the discipline.

Only a single major work of ancient Greek astronomy has been preserved for us in its entirety – Ptolemy’s *Almagest*, composed in about CE 150 (trans. Toomer 1984). No one doubts that it was the best and most comprehensive in the field. In its preface (*Alm.* 1.1) Ptolemy is at pains to define his discipline and to relate it to other disciplines. Now Ptolemy subsequently wrote a treatise on astrology known from its four parts or “books” as the *Tetrabiblos* (trans. Robbins 1971). Whether it too was the best in its field is today unanswerable, not because there are no other extant treatises to compare it with – there are, some of which we shall meet later – but because meaningful criteria for “best in show” when the show is astrology cannot now be formulated. More to the point, though, Ptolemy is just as concerned with defining astrology in the *Tetrabiblos* (1.1) as he is with defining astronomy in the *Almagest*, adding moreover chapters on whether “astrological knowledge is attainable” and if attainable whether it is also “helpful” (1.2–3). By comparing the beginnings of these two treatises, we can thus recapture the relationship between astronomy and astrology as seen by a scientist who was both the pre-eminent practitioner of the former and a leading theoretician of the latter. One could not hope for better, provided of course that Ptolemy was broadly in tune with the intellectual spirit of his times – which he most certainly was.

Let us start with astronomy and the *Almagest* (1.1). Among what we would call the arts and sciences and the Greeks the divisions of “philosophy,” astronomy, says Ptolemy, is a branch of one of the three forms of “theoretical” (as opposed to “practical”) philosophy. The three forms of theoretical philosophy are (1) theology, which is concerned with immutable and imperceptible objects, (2) mathematics, which is concerned with immutable but perceptible objects, and (3) physics, which is concerned with mutable and perceptible objects. Astronomy belongs to the intermediate form, mathematics, because its objects of study, the

stars and planets, meet the two necessary conditions of immutability and perceptibility. What is mutable, Ptolemy asserts, cannot be surely known; likewise neither can that which is entirely beyond perception. Because astronomy, qua mathematical philosophy, studies objects which are both perceptible and immutable, it is an excellent road to knowledge, the best as Ptolemy sees it.

Certainly, the premise that what cannot be perceived cannot be known makes a good deal of sense, especially if we think of knowledge in terms of the acquisition of verifiable truths about the world. But why can there be no knowledge of mutable things? Ptolemy seems to be excluding just about everything we would consider the proper objects of scientific inquiry – except the stars, which from a modern point of view are no less mutable than any other class of objects in the perceptible universe.

Here we must confront the – to us – massively alien postulates on which Ptolemy founds the science of astronomy. Like virtually all intellectuals in classical antiquity Ptolemy thought in terms of order, rank, and hierarchy. In any category you care to name, some things were simply superior to, better than, others. Ontologically, the permanent trumps the impermanent, the abstract trumps the concrete, the simple and uniform trump the complex. Epistemically, to comprehend something permanent trumps the comprehension of something mutable, so much so that only the former really qualifies as “knowledge.”

For permanency nothing in the perceptible universe beats the celestial bodies. Since all changes to their appearances (the phases of the Moon, eclipse phenomena, the reddening of the sun as it rises from or sinks below the horizon) can be readily explained by external causes, the conclusion that the stars themselves are unchanging in their nature was hard to avoid. So if unchanging, then immortal; and if immortal, then divine.

Although the stars do not seem to change in and of themselves, they most certainly change position, both collectively in the apparent rotation of the universe around our globe of earth, and in the case of the sun, the moon, and the other five planets visible to the naked eye, relative to each other and the “fixed” stars, in highly complex patterns of individual motion.

Accordingly, Greek astronomy concerned itself exclusively with *motion*, that is with change of *position* over *time*. As Ptolemy put it, “that division [of theoretical philosophy] which determines the nature involved in forms and motion from place to place, and which serves to investigate shape, number, size, and place, time and suchlike, one may define as ‘mathematics’ ” (*Alm.* 1.1, trans. Toomer).

Note that Ptolemy’s definition covers, as it must, geometry and arithmetic (“mathematics” in the modern sense) as well astronomy. Note also how Ptolemy defines the lowest – not his word, but a fair reflection of his attitude, I think – division of theoretical philosophy: “The division [of theoretical philosophy] which investigates material and ever-moving nature, and which concerns itself with ‘white’, ‘hot’, ‘sweet’, ‘soft’ and suchlike qualities one may call ‘physics’; such an order of being is situated (for the most part) amongst corruptible bodies and below the lunar sphere” (*Alm.* 1.1, trans. Toomer).

The distinction between the “sublunary” world of “corruptible bodies” and the celestial world of the permanent and divine was reinforced by Aristotle’s differentiation between the motion proper to bodies in each realm. Observation and common sense suggest that things on earth move in a straight line up or down unless impetus in some other direction, whose cause we can see, is imparted to them. They do not, of their own accord, move in circles. But that, the Greeks discovered, was precisely what the celestial bodies do or appear to do: they revolve in orbits around the earth, all of them together westward in the period of a day, and the seven planets eastward (for the most part) in different periods and complex individual orbits. It follows then that celestial bodies differ from terrestrial not only in durability but also fundamentally in their very nature: they are endowed with the alien quality of autonomous circular motion. Not until Newton and the discovery of the universal applicability of the laws of gravity was this great conceptual gulf between earth and heaven bridged: stuff “up there” is the same as stuff “down here.”

Even on modern criteria the *Almagest* is indisputably a work of science. It makes no statements about the motions, positions, and periods of the celestial bodies which cannot be verified or falsified.

But we would do well to remember that it is not a secular work: it is a work about the behavior of visible gods, and for that reason Ptolemy quite properly locates it midway between theology (immortal and imperceptible objects) and physics (mortal and perceptible objects) as a discipline concerned with the very special class of objects which though immortal are nevertheless perceptible and hence scientifically comprehensible.

And the practical utility of astronomy? That too is as theological as it is ethical. “With regard to virtuous conduct in practical actions and character, this science, above all things, could make men see clearly; from the constancy, order, symmetry and calm which are associated with the divine, it makes its followers lovers of this divine beauty, accustoming them and reforming their natures, as it were, to a similar spiritual state” (*Alm.* 1.1, trans. Toomer).

Ptolemy introduces his later work, the *Tetrabiblos*, as a companion piece, a sequel to the *Almagest*. Astrology for Ptolemy is not a separate discipline from astronomy, and it is certainly not an unscientific application of astronomy. It is simply part two of “prognosis through astronomy” (*Tetr.* 1.1, first sentence). Notice how he does not even give astrology a technical name of its own:²

Of the means of prediction through astronomy, O Syrus, two are the most important and valid. One, which is first both in order and effectiveness, is that whereby we apprehend the aspects of the movements of sun, moon, and stars in relation to each other and to the earth, as they occur from time to time; the second is that in which by means of the natural character of these aspects themselves we investigate the changes which they bring about in that which they surround [i.e. the earth]. (*Tetr.* 1.1, trans. Robbins)

The first method, Ptolemy reminds his patron Syrus, he has already expounded in the treatise we know as the *Almagest*. It enables us to predict the positions of the celestial bodies relative to each other and the earth through knowledge of their orbital motions. By the second method we examine the “configurations” (*schématismous*) of the heavenly bodies to

predict the changes which the celestial configurations effect on earth through their “natural qualities.”

In judging the second method, says Ptolemy, there are two errors to avoid. The first is to suppose that one can attain the level of “certainty” reached by the first method. That is an impossible goal because the second method addresses our mutable world of “material quality,” where things can only be “guessed at” – and that “with difficulty” (the single word *dyseikaston*). The second error is to go to the other extreme and deny the possibility of drawing any true and useful conclusions about the effects of the celestial on the terrestrial, which is to fly in the face of the evidence of manifest celestial causation such as the sun’s daily and annual effects on earth.

The plausibility of Ptolemy’s argument from solar influence to the influence of celestial bodies in general does not yet concern us, for our task in this first chapter has only been to differentiate between astronomy and astrology as the ancient Greeks conceived the two enterprises. Taking Ptolemy as our guide, we have seen how an expert in both might integrate them as a single predictive art yielding results of greater or lesser probability and reliability.

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