

A Brief History of Ancient Astrology

Roger Beck

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A Brief History of Ancient Astrology

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For Janet

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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

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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.

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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