

Chaldaeans, astrologers

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It was conventional practice in the Greco-Roman world for astrologers to be called by the generic term “Chaldaeans,” since Mesopotamia was renowned for astral omens and astrology (Chaldaea was in southern Mesopotamia). Vitruvius (*De arch.* 9.6.2) expresses a common view of astrology’s origins: “What effects the 12 signs, 5 planets, Sun and Moon have on the reckoning of human life must be granted to the calculations of the Chaldaeans, for the doctrine of natal astrology is properly theirs, from which they can explain past and future events from astronomical calculations.” Like the Persian *Magoi*, whose geographical name later became a generic occupational term (see *MAGI, PERSIAN*), from the Hellenistic period onward, one meaning of “Chaldaeans” was “astrologers” of any nationality (though other meanings co-existed) (Cumont 1912: 27).

The earliest use of Chaldaeans as a non-geographical designation is found in Herodotus (1.181–3), who calls the priests of Bel (i.e., MARDUK) *Chaldaioi*. Arrian (*Anab.* 7.16–17) relates their involvement with oracles, as does DIODORUS OF SICILY; the latter, however, claims that Egypt was the origin of Bel and his priests, “whom the Babylonians call Chaldaeans,” and that these priests also observe the stars (1.28.1). Chaldaean priests were thus associated with oracles and especially astrological divination. Berossos (fl. third century BCE)

was said to be a Chaldaean priest of Bel (Sen. *Q Nat.* 3.29.1), a historian and astrologer who set up the first astrology school on the island of Kos (Vitr. *De arch.* 9.6.2).

PHILO JUDAEUS mentions the Chaldean connections (both geographical and astrological) of Abraham the patriarch (*De congressu* 49). Both Sextus Empiricus (*Math.* 5) and Cicero (*Div.* 2.85–99) discuss “Chaldaean” astrology. The ubiquity of “Chaldaean” as a synonym for “astrologer” leads Cicero to point out that the name Chaldaean comes “not from their art but from their race” (*Div.* 1.2).

SEE ALSO: Astrology, ancient Near East; Astrology, Greece and Rome; Berossos of Babylon; Cicero, Marcus Tullius; Vitruvius (Pol(l)io).

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