

MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology

AHSS

Week 2: Babylonian astrology and cosmology

Weekly Description

Purpose of the Week

This week's purpose is to gain an understanding of the core features of Babylonian astrology, through the secondary (scholarly) material, and the primary sources and, also to engage with historiographical issues.

Tasks

- Do the required reading for this week, particularly the primary sources.
- Watch Nick's pre-recorded lecture on Babylonian astrology.
- Come to the Zoom seminar if you can or, listen to the recording.
- Prepare for next week's seminar discussions.

Weekly Description

The origins of western astrology, together with all horoscopic astrology (including in India) can be traced through the written records to the civilisations of Mesopotamia (roughly equating to modern Iraq) in the third millennium BCE. We often use the term Babylonian as a synonym for Mesopotamian because for over a thousand years Babylon was the most important city (or one of the most important cities) in the region. The earliest omen (the Latin word for 'warning' is usually applied to Mesopotamian material) tablets, dated (although there is debate about their origins) to around 2,200 BCE. Although the surviving records are often scarce, we can trace astrology's development through the Old Babylonian Kingdom of the early second millennium to the Assyrian empire of the ninth and eighth centuries BCE and down to the Hellenistic period, after 331 BCE.

Until the 1980s-90s it was common for historians to create models for understanding the Mesopotamian cosmology – or worldview. For example, did they have theories of fate? After then there was a recognition that it may be safest to stick closely to what the texts actually say, rather than assuming that there was any grand philosophical narrative about the nature of the world.

All the cuneiform evidence indicates that, until the fifth century BCE astrology concerned only the king and collective affairs. There was no astrology which concerned the individual, aside from the king, and the astrology of the king concerned only the kind of actions he should take and when.

Astrology was rationalised in a number of ways:

1. Like all things the celestial bodies had a relationship with, or were embodiments of, the gods and goddesses.
2. The movements of the celestial bodies were repetitive and cyclical. Therefore, the changes they indicated were likely to recur when they reached similar positions.

Two crucial developments took place late in this period. The first was the creation of a zodiac of twelve equal-sized signs, which has been the key organizing grid of the astrology of the ancient Near East, the classical world, the west and India ever since. The second was the development of the birth chart in the fifth century BCE,

This week's material will examine this process. We will raise questions concerning astrology's origins, nature, development and social and political functions.

The Soul

In view of the inquiry into the relationship between astrology and the inner world, a key question is how we understand this relationship in the Mesopotamian world.

There is some discussion concerning whether and how the Mesopotamians possessed concepts of soul or immortality.

For discussion see:

Lorenz, Hendrik, "Ancient Theories of Soul", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/ancient-soul/>

Bauks, Michaela. "'Soul-Concepts' in Ancient Near Eastern Mythical Texts and Their Implications for the Primeval History." *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2016, pp. 181–93. (Available on JSTOR).

Historical Debates

The secondary sources which deal with the period contain many statements which can either be used as the foundation for research, or perhaps can be challenged.

For example, Franz Cumont credits the Babylonians as being 'the mother of astronomy, star-worship, and astrology'.¹ Roy Willis and Patrick Curry write that astrology was part of the official state religious practices in Babylon, where it emerged as a well-organized proto-scientific and quasi-religious system; Roy Willis describes it as having been designed by the priesthood to serve the ruling classes.² According to Otto Neugebauer astrology was responsible for the emergence of spherical geometry, and the doctrine of logarithms, which would have otherwise been hardly possible.³ Abraham Sachs classified the three centuries spanning 800 and 500 BCE as a period of 'new, adventuresome spirit' where Mesopotamian astrology and astronomy 'took a radically new step [...]', due to the invention of the zodiac', and, later, birth charts.⁴

Thought for the Week

Should Babylonian astrology be better classed as 'omen divination'?

How and why did Babylonian astrology change?

¹ Franz Cumont, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans*, (USA, Kessinger Publishing, 1912), p.4

² Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Pulling Down the Moon*, (King's Lynn: Berg, 2004), p.:22

³ Otto Neugebauer, *Astronomical Cuneiform Texts*, (New York: Springer Publishing, 1983), p.:71

⁴ Abraham Sachs, 'Babylonian Horoscopes', *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* (1952), 49-75, p.53.