

Omens and Astrology

The renowned scholar of astrology, David Pingree, said about the 'science of astrology' and its origins, that astrology depends on:

"...the notion that the planets, in their eternal rotations about the earth, transmit motion (change) to the four elements and to the assemblages of elements, animate and inanimate, in the sublunar world. This theory is completely different from that of celestial omens, in which the gods, whose physical manifestations are the constellations and planets, send messages concerning their intentions regarding kings and countries by means of celestial phenomena. That these divine intentions can be altered by the use of propitiatory rituals...emphasizes the fundamental conceptual difference between omens and astrology."

From Astral Omens to Astrology: From Babylon to Bīkāner. Rome: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 1997, pp. 21-22.

What do you think of Pingree's position? Do you agree or disagree? Using primary sources and secondary scholarship, give *pro* and *contra* evidence for Pingree's assessment.

Student activity week 6

Izabela Podlaska-Konkel

- 1) Who was David Pingree?
- 2) What was the source of the quotation?
- 3) What was his main statement?
- 4) How did Pingree define 'astral omens'?
Evidence *pro* and *contra* his assessment.
- 5) How did Pingree define 'astrology' and 'horoscope'? Evidence *pro* and *contra* his statement.
- 6) Conclusion.

1) Who was David Pingree?

David Edwin Pingree (1933 - 2005)

David Pingree (1933-2005), longtime Professor of History of Mathematics and Classics at Brown University. He studied at Harvard University, where he earned his doctorate in 1960 with **a dissertation on the supposed transmission of Hellenistic astrology to India**. His dissertation was supervised by Daniel Henry Holmes Ingalls, Sr. and **Otto Eduard Neugebauer**. He had joined the History of Mathematics Department at Brown in 1971, served as its Chair since the mid-1980s, and later was its sole regular faculty member. During that time, he supervised approximately ten doctoral students. **Pingree was a leading scholar of the history of exact science (including mathematics, astronomy, astrology, and magic) in the ancient world**. His many books and articles are very influential, and the quality of his scholarship was recognized by many academic honors, including a MacArthur Fellowship.

Source: In Memoriam- Mathematical Association of America
<https://www.maa.org/news/memoriam-archive>

2) What was the source of the quotation?

David Pingree, *From Astral Omens to Astrology: From Babylon to Bīkāner* (Rome: Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 1997)

This collection of essays is intended to explore **the development of celestial omens in Mesopotamia, their relationship to the astrology developed in the Hellenistic period by the Greeks**, and the spread of astrology to the East and its amplification there. In these studies I have attempted to illustrate the incredible facility with which these sciences, which serve as an example for other systems of knowledge, were transmitted from one culture to another, and to indicate a few ways in which the recipient cultures changed the received theories. I have and will write more extensively elsewhere about the technical transformations that accompanied the transmissions.

(...) These eight essays are based on a series of lectures that I gave in Rome, Bologna, and Venice in June 1995.

[pp. 9-10]

3) What was his main statement?

Pingree rejected the connection and continuity between Babylonian astral omens and the theory of astrology.

4) How did Pingree define 'astral omens'?

'By **celestial omens** the gods, without being asked any question, voluntarily communicated to the king their intentions by altering the normal appearance and behaviour of the stars and planets, which serve as the physical manifestations of the divine powers in the world of men. The description of the ominous phenomena forms the protasis of an omen, the associated phenomena affecting the king, his court, and his country constitute the apodosis.

The usefulness of these divine warnings lay in the fact that **propitiation rituals**, called *namburbis*, could assuage the anger of the gods and ameliorate the situation of the king.'

[p. 11]

Mesopotamian astral omens

Tablet 63 so-called the Venus Tablet of Ammisaduqua presented the entire eight-year cycle of Venus based on the observation from circa 1651 BCE. It linked the Venus cycle to the political and economic affairs, which was clearly stated in the omen:

'Venus in the west became visible: the harvest of the land will prosper.'

David Pingree and Erica Reiner, *Babylonian Planetary Omens*, Vol. 2, Part 1: *Enuma Anu Enlil, Tablet 63: The Venus Tablet of Ammisaduqa* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1975), p. 29.

'When you look up a sign (in these omen collections) be it one in the sky or one on earth and if that sign's evil portent is confirmed(?) then it has indeed occurred with regard to you in reference to an enemy or to a disease or to a famine. Check (then) the date of that sign and should no sign have occurred to counteract (that) sign, should no annulment have taken place, one cannot make (it) pass by, its evil (consequences) cannot be removed (and) it will happen front. (...) (When) you have identified the sign and (when) the city, the king and his subjects from enemy, pestilence and famine (predicted) what will you say? When they complain to you, how will you make (the evil consequences) bypass (them)?'

A. Leo Oppenheim, 'A Babylonian Diviner's Manual', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 33 (January-October 1974) pp. 204-5.

Planets and astral magic in Babylonia

'Sun, Moon, and Venus, represented by their sundisk, the lunar crescent, and the eight-pointed monly depicted on monuments-steles, boundary guardians of the provisions sworn to in recorded therein. **The influence of these stellar deities on man is twofold: they are both the origin of ills that beset him and the beneficent powers that can be made favorably disposed toward a suppli- cant.** They may cause affliction, exerting nefarious influence on their own or through sorcerers' manipulations, and they may herald ill fortune by their motions and configurations that are recorded in the extensive collection of celestial omens. However, **through proper prayers and rituals the stars' influence can avert the portended misfortune** and assist the exorcist and the physician in healing illness. (...)

Stars function in a dual role in relation to man: direct influence and serve as mediators between man and god. Directly, through astral irradiation, they transform ordinary substances into potent ones that will be effective in magic, medicine, or ritual, as materia medica, amulets, or cultic appurtenances. Stars also provide reliable answers to the query diviner. More important, in their second role stars are man's **medium of communication with the divine.**'

5) How did Pingree define 'astrology' and 'horoscope'?

Mesopotamia: 'The other innovation was the application in the late 5th century B.C. of **celestial omens to personal nativities** to produce a class of texts (**wrongly entitled 'horoscopes'** since the latter term refers to **the ascendant and implies the computation of the cusps of the twelve astrological places** which play no role in these cuneiform texts). **They remain omens applied to individuals, but partake of some of the characteristics of astrology.**'

Greece: 'The science of astrology was developed in, most probably, the late 2nd or early 1st century B.C. as a mean to predict, from horoscopic themata **draw up for the moment of an individual's birth (or conception), the fate of that native.** This form of astrology, called genethliology, is rooted in Aristotelian physics and Hellenistic astronomy, but also **borrowed much from Mesopotamia and some elements from Egypt** as well as developing many theories of its own. The adaptation of this form of astrology to determine the **best time for initiating actions** is termed catarchic astrology. These are the two main forms of astrology known in the West; interrogational astrology was developed in India in the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. on the basis of Greek catarchic astrology', and historical astrology in Sasanian Iran in perhaps the 5th or 6th century A.D. on the basis of continuous forms of Greek Genethliology.' [p. 20]

Pingree on astrology

'But astrology does have a Mesopotamian background. (...) **the closest Babylonian parallels to Greek astrology are the so-called "horoscopes"**, which record planetary positions and other data at the time of a native's birth and, sometimes, computed conception and the texts which inform the diviner about the interpretation of these omens". These **proto-horoscopes** themselves generally **give little information beyond the date of birth**, sometimes the date of conception, data concerning the Moon at the syzygies of the current month (presumably to be utilized in computing the date of conception), and the zodiacal signs (sometimes with degrees) in which the planets were positioned; occasionally it is also noted whether a planet was visible or not. **The treatises on interpretation are difficult to interpret because of their use of a technical vocabulary that is not yet understood:** the tallu in which a planet may stand, and the DUR and mihru to which it may stand.' [p. 23]

Francesca Rochberg on Babylonian cuneiform horoscopes

'(...) Babylonian "horoscopes" are documents that assemble and record a particular series of astronomical data which have been determined to occur either on or near the date of the birth of an individual. A number of examples "look at the hour," noting the time of birth occasionally with respect to a seasonal hour (one-twelfth of the length of daylight), and provide planetary positions in the zodiac for the specified time. Only the moon's position is affected by a change in hour, since it moves so much more rapidly than the sun or the five planets. That planetary data are not greatly affected, may perhaps explain why the hour of birth is not noted with regularity in the Babylonian horoscopes. Even when noted, the Babylonian horoscopes' "inspection of the hour" is not paralleled by their synonymous Greek counterparts, where refers not to the consideration of the time of day, but of the point of the ecliptic (the ascendant) rising at the moment of birth (Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 111,2). (...) the basic idea of predicting the life of a person on the basis of astronomical phenomena associated with the birth date was originally Babylonian, Babylonian.'

Francesca Rochberg, 'Babylonian Horoscopes', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 88, Part 1 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1998), pp. 1-2.

Babylonian Horoscopes

The oldest survived extended personal horoscope was dated by Abraham Sachs to 29 April 410 BCE and contained the short prediction for the native **'(Things?) will (?) be good before you'**.

Abraham Sachs, 'Babylonian Horoscopes', *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1952).p. 54.

1 Nisannu, night of the 14th(?), ...

2 son of Sumu-usur, son of Sumu-iddina, descendant of Deke, was born.

3 At that time, the moon was below (lit.: the lower part of) the Pincer the Scorpion,

4 Jupiter in Pisces, Venus

5 in Taurus, Saturn in Cancer,

6 Mars in Gemini. Mercury, which had set, was not vis[ible].

7 Nisannu 1, (duration of visibility of the new crescent was) 28

(time degrees), [visibility of the moon after sunrise on)

the 14th(?) was 4,40 (time degrees).

8 The last visibility of the lunar crescent was the 27th.

Rev.

1 (Things?) will be propitious for you.

2 Du'uzu, year 12,

3 [yea]r(?)8 ...

4 [...]

Neugebauer, Otto and H.B. van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1959), p. 104

Vettius Valens II,36 p. 114,10-15

TRANSLATION

Sun (and) Mercury in Aries, moon in Pisces, Saturn (and) Horoscopus in Aquarius, Mars (and) Venus in Taurus, Jupiter in Libra, the Lot of Fortune in Pisces,¹ the Lot of Daimon in Capricorn. This person was possessed of a god like a madman (because) Jupiter, the ruler² of the Lot (of Fortune) (was found) in Libra, the (9th) locus concerning god, and Saturn, the ruler³ of the Daimon, in the Horoscopus, and Venus in Lower Midheaven.

COMMENTARY

Diagram: pl. 17

Perfect agreement is found for 108 March 28:

Text	Computed
☉ } ☿	☿ 7
☽ } ☿	☿ 18
♄ } ♀	♄ 10
♅ } ♀	♅ 4
H } ♀	about 2 A.M.
♀ } ♂	♂ 8
♂ } ♂	♂ 20
♄ } ♄	♄ 16

For related horoscopes cf. L 83.

Roger Beck, **A Brief History of Ancient Astrology** (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007)

'The oldest form of astrology is what we call **omen astrology**. Its persistence in Greek astrology, albeit in a very minor role, reveals **the dependence of Greek astrology on Babylonian astrology**. The former, as we shall see, is the latter's progeny. What distinguishes omen astrology from horoscopic astrology is **the absence of a comprehensive system relating all actual and potential celestial configurations on a single grid**. Horoscopic astrology treats of the positions of the celestial bodies relative to each other and to the earth. As we saw in chapter 1, **it is the "aspects" of the stars and planets, not the stars and planets themselves, that indicate or determine outcomes**. Omen astrology deals origins and types of astrology primarily with discrete and occasional phenomena, especially dramatic ones such as **eclipses**; and since the ancients could not differentiate on scientific grounds between what happens in "space" and what happens in earth's own atmosphere, **omen astrology included meteorological indicators**, thunder in particular, with celestial phenomena proper.' [pp. 10-11]

Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum, 'Arrows, Aiming and Divination: Astrology as a Stochastic Art' in *Divination: Perspectives for a New Millennium*, ed. Patrick Curry (Farnham: Ashgate/Gower, 2010)

Astrology differs in some respects from other forms of divination, in that its medium is the planets and stars in the sky, whose movements can be measured and consistently predicted (unlike, for instance, the casting of lots, which change each time they are thrown). Also, once a chart is written down, it becomes **a stable and enduring record of a fleeting moment**, whereas once the flock of birds has passed, or the liver cools, the divination ends. **Because it is based on the physical representation of the universe, people like Ptolemy theorized a mechanism of physical causation; if such is the case, then astrology becomes a proto-science.** As a science, it should be susceptible to **predictable results**. However, like medicine, its results are not consistently correct, so it therefore has a commonality with that and other disciplines, like rhetoric, which depend on the practitioner's experience, skill and creative interpretation in a unique situation.

**David Pingree, 'Hellenophilia versus the History of Science',
Isis, Vol. 83, No. 4 (Dec., 1992).**

'(...) I have embraced the word employed in the title of this article, "**Hellenophilia**," as it is a most convenient description of a set of attitudes that I perceive to be of increasing prevalence within the profession of the history of science. (...)

The first of these is that the Greeks invented science; the second is that they discovered a way to truth, the scientific method, that we are now successfully following; the third is that the only real sciences are those that began in Greece; and the fourth (and last?) is that the true definition of science is just that which scientists happen to be doing now, following a method or methods adumbrated by the Greeks, but never fully understood or utilized by them.'

6) Conclusion

- Pingree separated Mesopotamian understanding of planetary influences from the Greek view of cosmos and planets.
- Mesopotamian magic connected with planets didn't fit in Pingree's definition of astrology as a science.
- Contradiction: celestial Mesopotamian omens are physical manifestation of planets as in Greece, but he denied the similarity.
- A narrow definition of 'horoscope' – based only on technical term, not on idea of planetary influence at the moment of birth.
- Maybe Pingree is a victim of 'Hellephilia' – the term he invented himself.
- Astrology and divination are not a good match for Pingree (not scientific, too superstitious?).
- Weather omens in Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* (II.11-13)