

MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Astrology, History, Spirit and Soul
Weekly Description
Week 3: Astrology in Classical Civilisation

Purpose of the Week

To gain a critical understanding of the development and nature of astrology in the classical world.

Tasks this Week

- Engage with the required primary sources
- Watch Nick's lecture on Astrology in the Classical World
- Make sure that you have planned ahead in order to complete the essay deadlines.
- Prepare for next week's seminar discussions.

Weekly Description

This week investigates the classical theory and practice of astrology in the Greek and Roman worlds. The consensus is that the modern technical structure of both Western and Indian astrology was largely developed in the period of Greek rule in Egypt (the so-called Ptolemaic period, after Ptolemy - the name of the kings of the Greek dynasty), drawing on Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Greek ideas and practice, probably after c.200 BCE. The first signs of the presence of Mesopotamian cosmology in Greece can be found in Homer's *Iliad*, c. 750 BCE and there is now a strong argument for oriental influences on the development of Greek philosophy after 600 BCE. That said, a remarkable lineage of Greek philosophers and mathematicians developed an innovative view of the cosmos which was based on geometrical models and natural causes. Within Greek thought, as a whole, there were competing cosmologies, some materialist or sceptical, others religious or mystical. This week will examine the development of Greek cosmology, and the subsequent fusion of Greek, Egyptian and Babylonian ideas in the development of Hellenistic astrology from c. 200 - 1 BCE. We will also explore the political and social uses and techniques of classical astrology in the Roman empire, raising questions concerning the practical and political applications of philosophy and cosmology.

Terminology

There are broad and narrow definitions of what constitutes the classical period. We take a broad definition which encompasses Greek and Roman culture from the eighth century BCE (the appearance of the works of Homer and Hesiod) to the fifth century CE (the end of the Roman empire in western Europe and the decline of classical pagan teaching). We may refer to Classical, Greek or Hellenistic astrology to describe the astrology of this period. Greek was the dominant language of transmission (only two major surviving works, Manilius' *Astronomica* and Firmicus Maternus' *Mathesis* were composed in Latin). The term 'Hellenistic' describes the period following the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 330s BCE, following which Greek culture spread east to northern India, absorbing other influences (Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Indian) as it did so. The notion that the Hellenistic period was usually syncretistic (syncretism = the amalgamation of different cultures) is based on the now largely-discredited idea that pre-Hellenistic classical Greek culture did not borrow from Egypt, Babylon and the Near East. However, it appears that horoscopic astrology, while initially developed in Mesopotamia, is technically largely the result of the syncretic combination of Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Greek ideas. The usual assumption is that this process was centred in Hellenistic Egypt.

The Soul

All schools of thought on classical Greece relevant to astrology had a theory of 'psyche'. There is no single agreed definition of the Greek term 'psyche', although it is usually translated in modern English as soul. There were philosophical schools, such as Atomism, which had no relevance for astrology and no theory of soul. However, all forms of astrology had a theory of soul, and Greek astrology cannot be understood without this.

To the Greeks, *psuchē* was the animating force in the cosmos. For simplicity we will use the word soul. The relationship between soul and the physical world varied through different philosophical schools. For Plato, the physical world emerged out of the world soul (the Latin term was *anima mundi*). The consequence is that soul existed apart from physical things, including the human body, so that the human soul exists independently of the body. Soul was also the origin of all physical things, which means that all things

have soul. Aristotle, Plato's student argued that, generally, soul and matter exist together. However, in one passage in *De Anima (On the Soul)* he implied that part of the soul can exist independently of the body. Medieval European Christians used this passage to argue that Aristotle fully accepted a transcendent soul. The third philosophical schools, the Stoics, argued that the physical matter and the soul exist entirely together and so there is no independent soul.

It is from '*psuchē*' that the modern word 'psychology' – speech or language of the soul, is derived. While the term is a modern classification, psychological insight and psychological techniques for healing and self-knowledge are not exclusive to the period following the invention of the term. Much modern psychology is scientific in the sense that it regards mind and consciousness as a product of physical processes, which can be explored through experimentation and statistics. Other schools of psychology recognise the inner reality of the individual as a much deeper and broader phenomenon. The most prominent exponent of this view in the modern world is C.G. Jung, whose work has had a profound impact on modern western astrology. Most schools of psychotherapy follow this view.

Egypt

The evidence is clear that Greek conceptions of a transcendent soul were adopted from Egypt, although there may have been other sources and the Egyptians did not relate the soul to the planets. Some classical historians have opposed this idea, but David Pingree's article on Hellenophilia, which is included in your historiographical reading, makes it clear that this is a result of prejudice. Through a combination of Platonic texts and Egyptian currents, concepts of a direct relationship between the soul and the stars became popular in the early centuries CE, under the Roman Empire. The evidence is found in a series of writings known as Hermetic and Gnostic.

Hermeticism and Gnosticism

The texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* were largely written in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE and are essential for understanding the nature of the soul in western astrology. The Latin translation by Marsilio Ficino in the 15th century is one of the foundational texts of what we now know as modern esotericism. The text delineates one of the dominant rationales for classical

astrology, adapting the Platonic theory that the whole universe is ensouled, the celestial bodies are divine, and the individual soul desires to return to its divine source. Book 2 contains one-line summaries of the meanings of the seven planetary spheres. The *Corpus Hermeticum* tends to the Gnostic, anti-Platonic opinion, that the cosmos is essentially evil rather than essentially good.

The Gnostic texts are similar to the Hermetic in their emphasis on a transcendent soul which travels through the planetary spheres. The term Gnosticism is derived from the concept that the soul can have direct experiential knowledge of the divine. Many of the Gnostic texts are Christian but were excluded from the official Christian scriptures. The Gnostic texts are generally 'cosmophobic' in that they regard the cosmos as a prison from which the soul must escape. The Gnostic texts were generally lost in European culture until their rediscovery and translation in the 20th century when, like the Hermetic texts, they became an influence on esoteric thought.

The Mysteries of Mithras

The Mysteries of Mithras (sometimes known as Mithraism) were a 'mystery religion'. The term 'mystery' is applied to practices which were secretive and had no written teachings. The Mithraic Mysteries adopted the Persian hero-god Mithras as their central iconic figure and developed rituals through which initiates ascended through the planetary spheres. They were therefore a ritual embodiment of ideas of the soul's journey in Hermeticism and Gnosticism. Mithras appears to have had some astronomical relationship but there are competing claims as to which constellation he might be related to. Membership was exclusively male and popular with the Roman army.

Source Problems

Between the *Enuma Anu Enlil*, compiled in the seventh century BCE, and the surviving works (Manilius, Dorotheus of Sidon, Vettius Valens, Ptolemy) of Greek astrology in the first-second centuries CE, there are no surviving complete astrological texts. There is therefore almost no documentary evidence. Almost the entire development of horoscopic astrology between

the earliest surviving birth-charts dated to 410 BC, and the texts of first century CE classical astrology.

Project Hindsight

From 1992 to around 1997 Project Hindsight aimed to make the entire corpus of Hellenistic astrology (the term they used, rather than Classical or Greek) available for the purposes of the practice of astrology. The project came to an end but, led to the modern identification of technical classical Greek astrology as a practice within contemporary western astrology.

Thought for the Week

Is astrology Greek?

What is the nature of the relationship between cosmos and psyche?

Resources

Course Lecture Notes: Philosophy

Some of the material this week overlaps with week 2 in the Foundations module.

Nick Campion course notes: Plato

Nick Campion course notes: Aristotle

Nick Campion course notes: Neoplatonism.

Nick Campion course notes: Stoicism