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# The Horoscopes of Cities in the Near East

# Concerns

The importance of the sky as a place of meaning and personality and an integral part of the terrestrial environment.

Textual sources, difficulties and preconceptions.

The abstraction from and conceptualisation of the sky in elaborate structures in the sky and on earth.

We should forget the word astrology. It did not exist in the languages spoken in the ancient Near East. In Greek it did not carry its modern meaning. We can equally see the examples I am about to look at as complex examples of skyscape archaeology.

I use the term horoscope to mean a mapping of the sky and earth at a particular moment in order to reveal complex meanings about present and future (and past if relevant).

In this talk I will explore the use of astrology and textual research in skyscape archaeology, illustrating source and interpretation problems

# Precedents for the foundation of cities

Left: Babylonian Boundary Stone 1100 BCE



- Dream of Gudea
- Persepolis: a cosmic city
- Selucia: story of astrological election
- Constantinople: story of astrological election

# The Foundation of Seleucia

## c.305 BCE

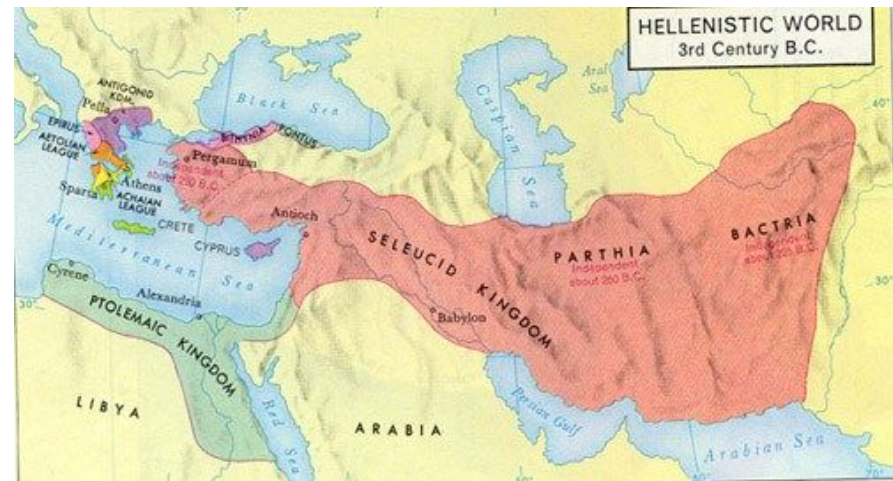
Seleucia was the capital city of the Seleucid empire, founded by Alexander the Great's general, Seleucus, in Mesopotamia and Persia.

When Seleucus, we are told, asked the astrologers, described in the later accounts as *magi*, for the most auspicious time at which to lay the foundations for his capital they tricked him and **chose an unlucky hour**.

However, fate intervened and the builders began early by mistake, unwittingly choosing a fortunate moment.

The second-century CE Alexandrian historian, Appian, couched the astrologers' response in unlikely Stoic terminology. According to him they admitted their devious plan and conceded 'That which is fated, O king...neither man nor city can change, for there is a fate for cities, as well as for men!'

Appian II,9.58 cited in Cramer, Frederick H., *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics*, Chicago: Ares Publishers 1996 [1954], p. 11.



**THE CONQUESTS OF ISLAM 622-945**

Scale 1:15,000,000 (240 miles=1 inch)

Statute Miles  
0 50 100 150 200 250

Desert

**IRAQ SYRIA and MESOPOTAMIA**

**LEGEND:**

- Conquests of Mohammed 622-32
- Conquests of the First Four Caliphs 632-661
- Conquests 661-750 (Ommeyyad Caliphs of Damascus)
- Conquests 750-945 (Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdad; Agilabids and Idrisids of N. Africa; Ommeyyad Emirs of Cordova)

Dates: x638 battle or siege; (642-47) Conquest or foundation

**THE CONQUESTS OF ISLAM 622-945**

Scale 1:30,000,000 (480 miles=1 inch)

Statute Miles  
0 100 200 300 400 500 600

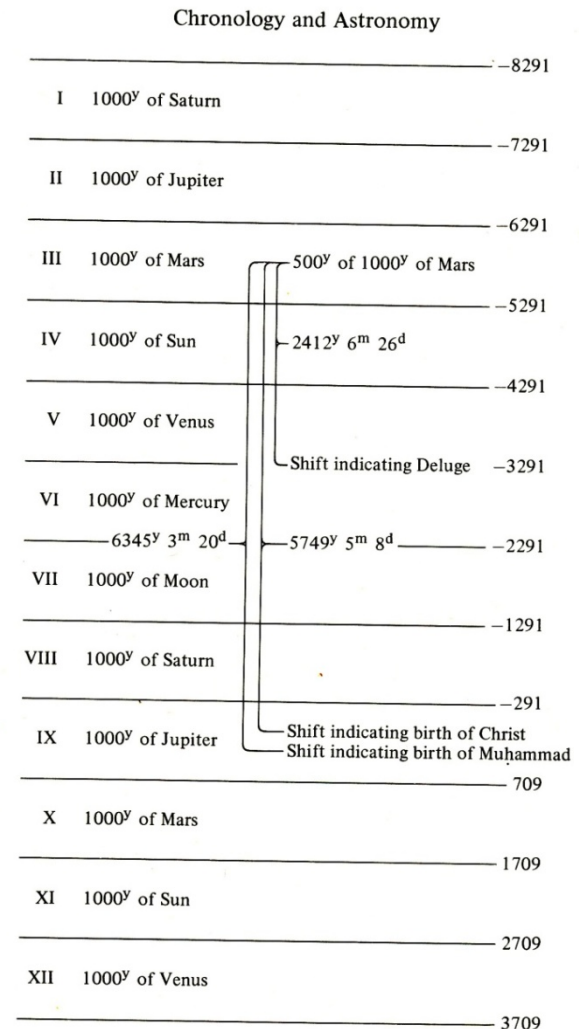
# Persian Astrological History

Under the Abbāsids, astrological history fulfilled two purposes, according to Gutas:

*A political one in that it presented the dominion of the 'Abbāsīd state, whose cycle was just beginning, as ordained by the stars and ultimately by God, with the implied message to all potential supporters of the 'Abbāsīd regime that political activity against them would be futile;*

*...an ideological one in that it inculcated the view of the 'Abbāsīd state as the legitimate and only successor, in the grand scheme of things governed by the stars, of the ancient empires in Mesopotamia and most immediately of the Sasanians.*

Gutas, Dimitri, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: the Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsīd Society (2<sup>nd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries)*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 46.



# The Cosmos as a Text in Islamic thought

The Islamic God (like the Jewish and Christian Gods) spoke in signs.

The Arabic for cosmos, '*âlam*', shares a root with both '*ilm*' (knowledge) and '*alâma*' (sign, mark).

Cosmos, in Arabic can therefore be understood as the means by which one obtains knowledge, particularly knowledge of God, a position very close to the Platonic view.

The world, or everything other than God, is therefore a means for God to speak to humanity, and all natural phenomena are therefore signs, *âyât*, of the divine.

What we now know as astrology itself was known as *Ahkam al-Nudium*, literally, the decrees of the stars.

# The Foundation of Cairo July 969

*‘On the very night Jawhar settled on the site he marked the perimeter of the city with wooden stakes string together with belled ropes. It was decided to break ground for the perimeter wall when the astrologers determined that the time was most propitious. According to legend, a crow landed on the cord and set the bells jangling, which the workmen took a signal to start work. The astrologers reckoned that the planet **Mars (al-Qahir, the “Ruler,” when Qahira) was in the ascendant, which was considered an unfavourable sign.** But according to another tradition, Mu’izz\* had given Jawhar instructions to build a city called Qahira that would rule the world. ‘*

Raymond, André, *Cairo*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 37.

\* **Abu Tamim Ma'ad al-Mu'izz Li-Dinillah** (fourth Fatimid Caliph, 953-975, 14<sup>th</sup> Ismaili Imam)

# The foundation of Baghdad

The city was founded by Caliph al-Mansur ( 95 – 158 AH (714 – 6 October 775 CE) in order to assert his independence from his predecessors.

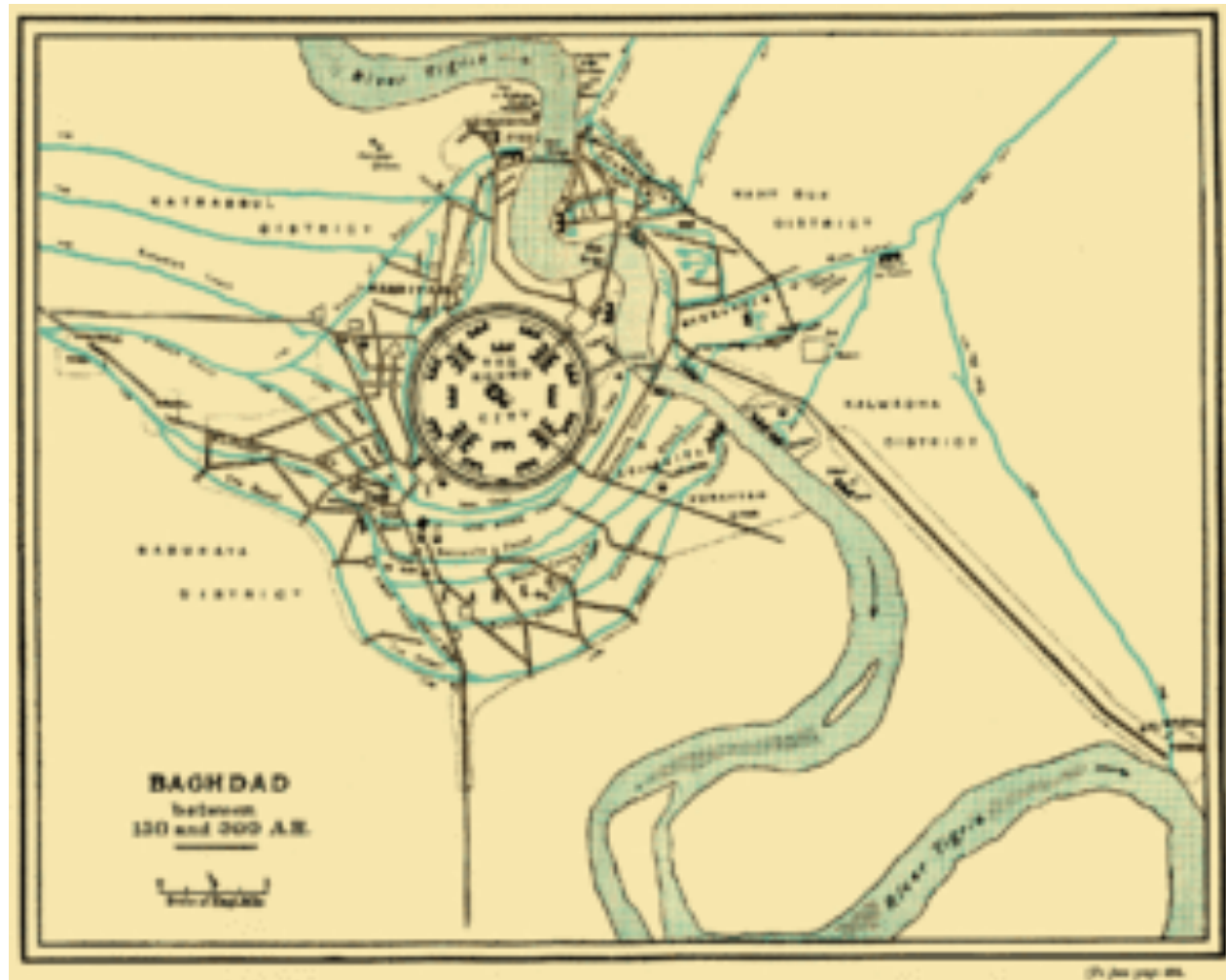
He employed a committee of astrologers to advise on the most auspicious moment. The date they chose was 31 July 762.

There is some dispute over the data but there is a 'most likely' horoscope (we will not deal with data problems here). Is this itself a problem?

Allawi, Ibrahim, 'Some Evolutionary and Cosmological Aspects to Early Islamic Town Planning' in Margaret Bentley Sevcenko (ed.), *Theories and Principles of Design in the Architecture of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture 1988, pp. 57-72.

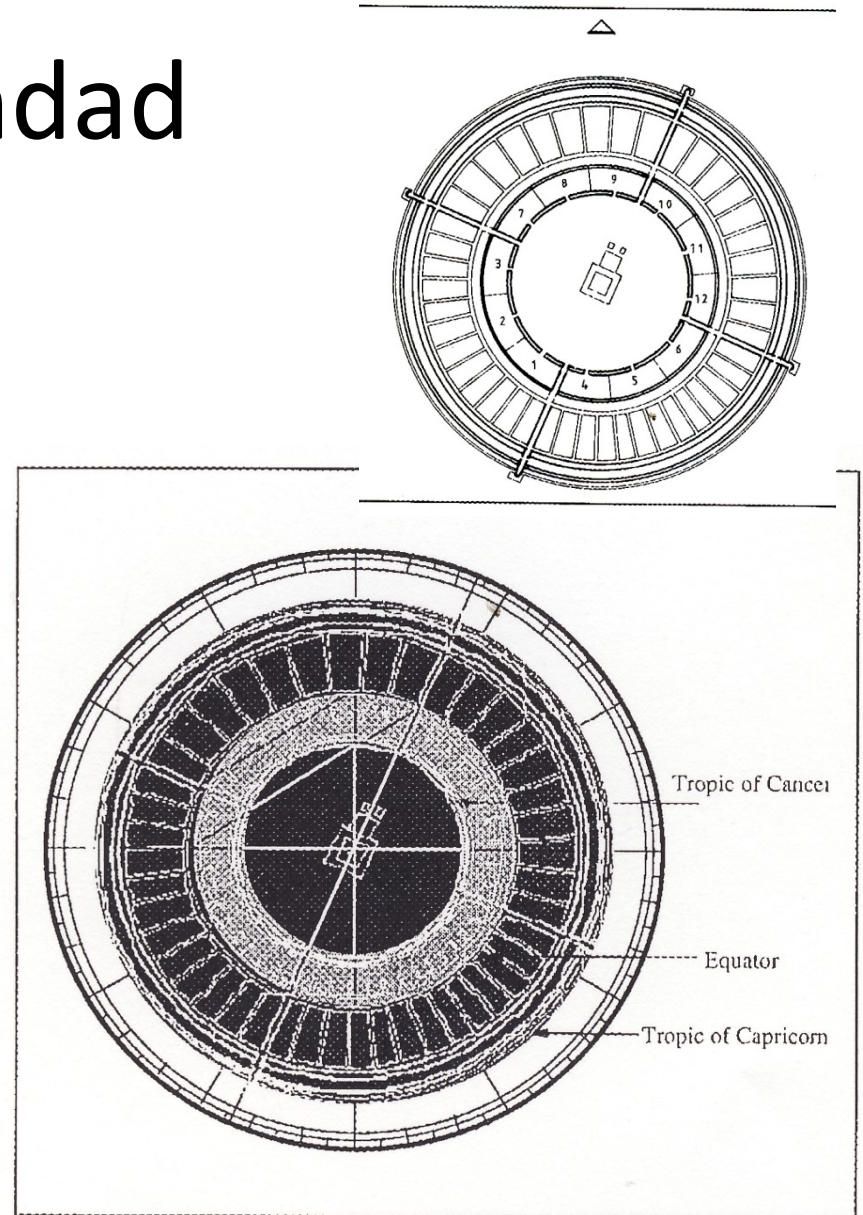
[http://archnet.org/library/documents/one-document.tcl?document\\_id=3776](http://archnet.org/library/documents/one-document.tcl?document_id=3776)

# The circular city of Baghdad 130-300 AH

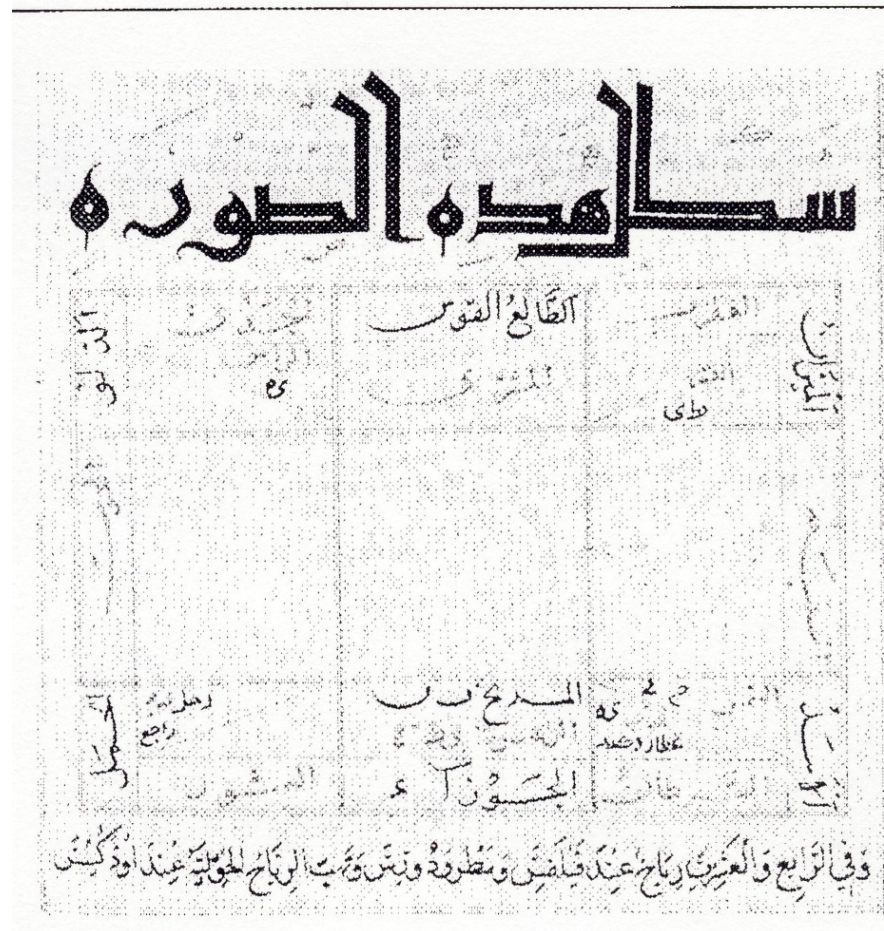


# Baghdad

- The city was designed on a circular plan, as a mirror of the sky.
- Was it conceived as, metaphorically, a cosmic world tree, a central axis, in a circular city plan, located at a particular moment when space and time came together in a powerful and auspicious pattern?
- It is a *cosmopolis*?



# The Horoscope of Baghdad according to Al Biruni (11<sup>th</sup> century)

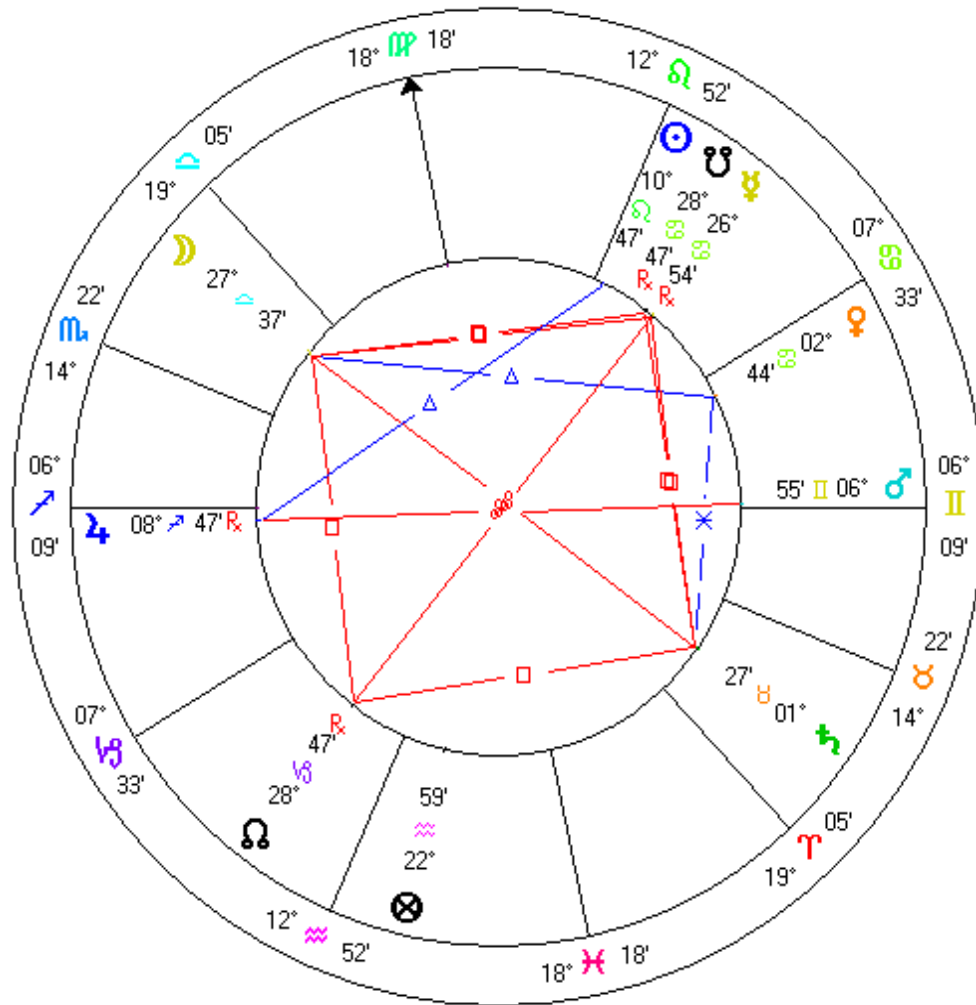


# The Baghdad horoscope in English

|         |                      |                         |                                                       |        |
|---------|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|--------|
|         | Capricornus          | Asciterens<br>Ascendens | Scorpio                                               |        |
| Amphora | Caput Draconis<br>25 | Jupiter                 | Moon<br>19.10                                         | Libra  |
| Pisces  |                      |                         |                                                       | Virgo  |
| Aries   |                      | Mars 2.50<br>Venus 20.0 | Umbra Draconis<br>26<br>Mercurius 25.7<br>Sun<br>8.40 | Taurus |
|         | Taurus               | Gemini                  | Cancer                                                |        |

# The Horoscope of Baghdad modern western format

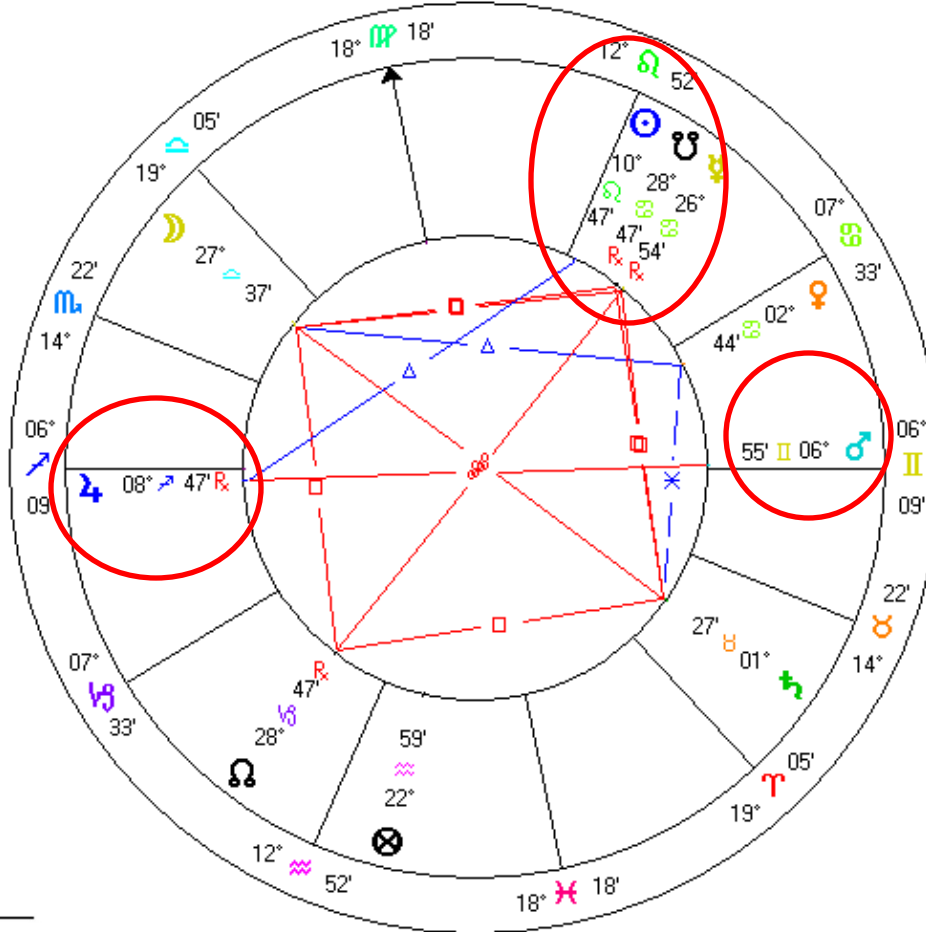
**Baghdad-2**  
**Natal Chart (6)**  
31 Jul 0762  
14:28 LMT -2:57:40  
Baghdad, Iraq  
33°N21' 044°E25'  
*Geocentric*  
*Tropical*  
*Placidus*  
*True Node*



# The Horoscope of Baghdad

## modern western format

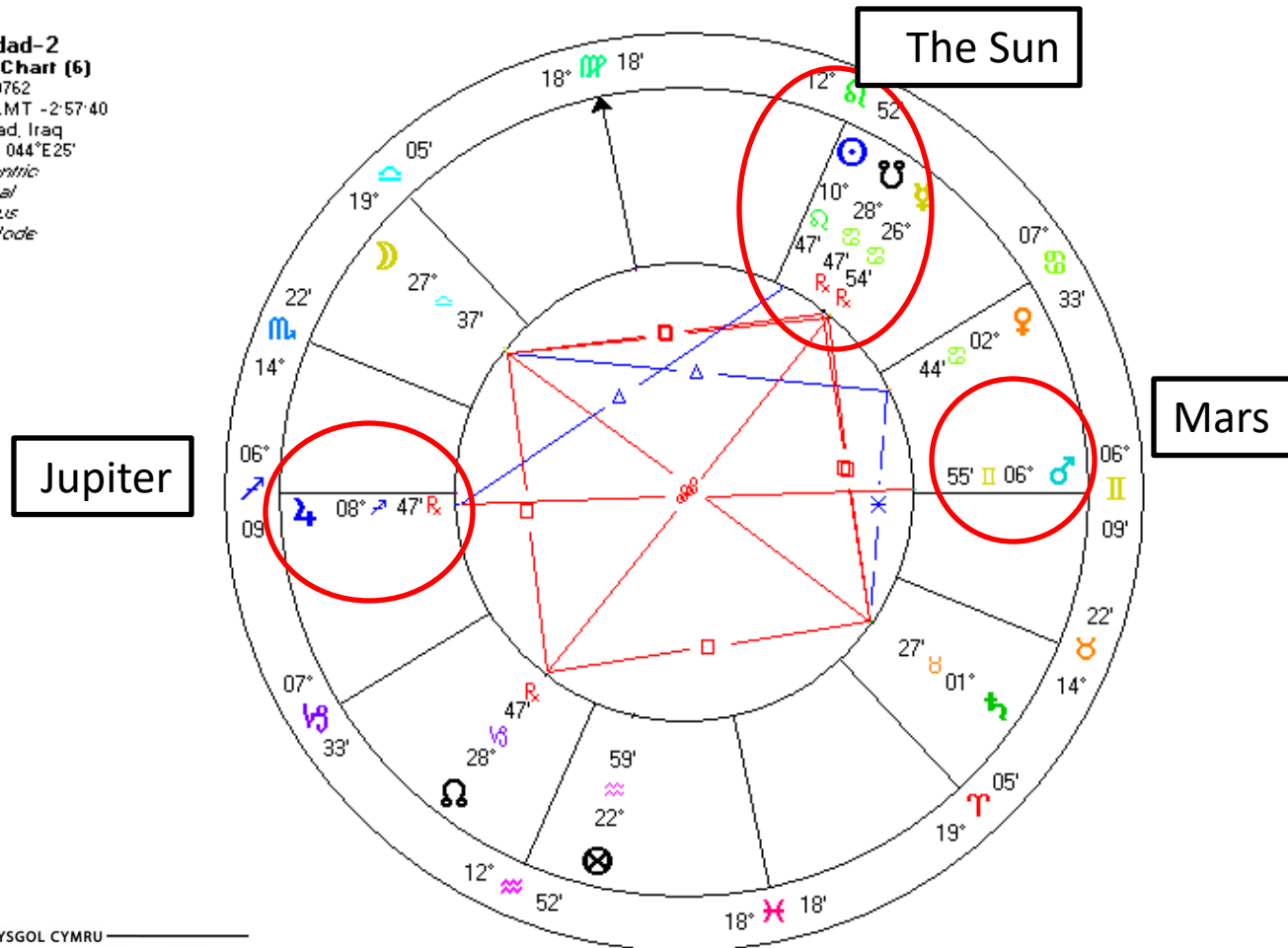
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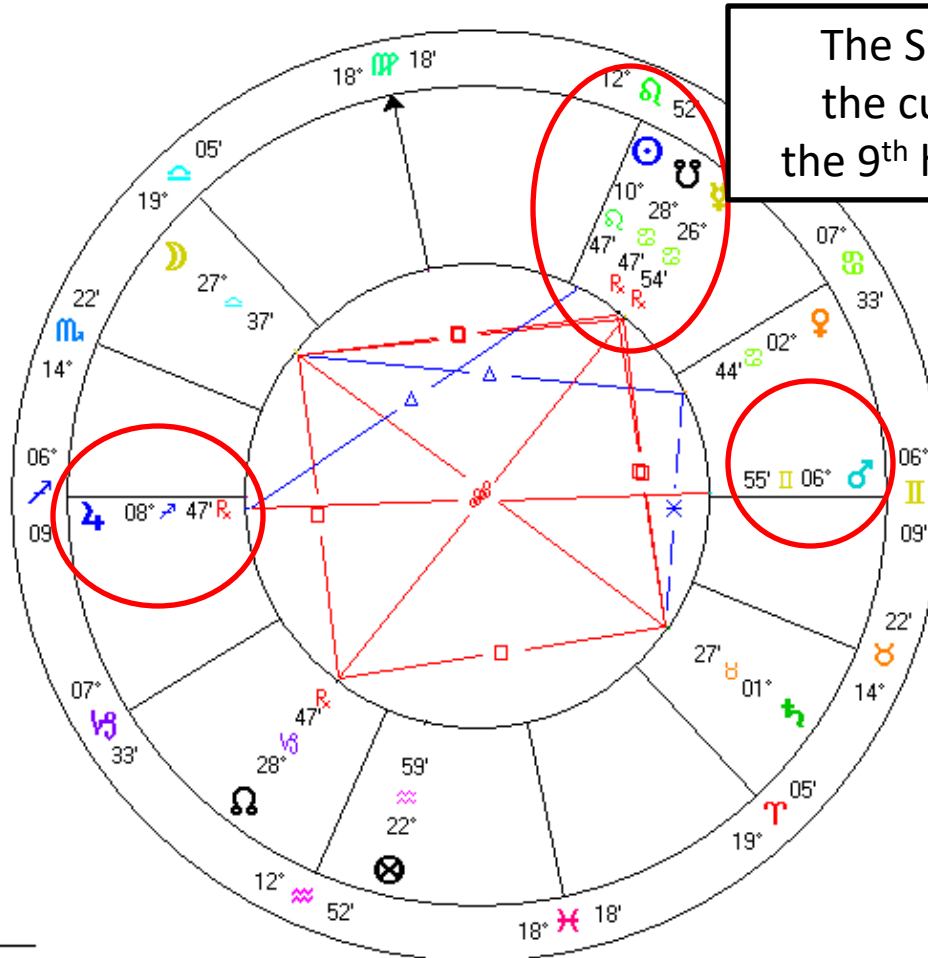


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Jupiter  
On the  
Ascendant



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# Are there any rules on founding cities? Not much!

**Sahl ibn Bishr al-Israili**, (c. 786-845 ?), 'If you wished to elect so that you might build a house...'

## Pay attention to

Moon; Planet ruling the sign containing the Moon; Ascendant; Planet ruling the sign containing the Ascendant; Lot of fortune; Mercury; Avoid Mars but if he is present have Venus strong and with power over Mars.

He gives other rules which get more complex but do not appear to have been followed.

## For Baghdad

Moon = strong score, increasing in light

Planet ruling the sign containing the Moon = Venus in reception with Moon, plus strong score

Ascendant = Sagittarius

Planet ruling the sign containing the Ascendant = Jupiter

Lot of fortune = Aquarius = ?

Mercury = weak and retrograde = ?

Mars is strong and not controlled by Venus

- ***IT IS DIFFICULT TO MAKE A CASE THAT THESE RULES WERE APPLIED***
- Sahl and Masha'allah, *Works*, trans. Benjamin Dykes, Golden Valley, NM: Cazimi Press, 2008, p. 199.



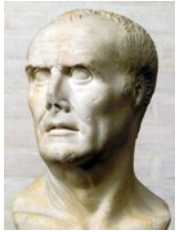
# Jupiter : Claudius Ptolemy

## Tetrabiblos 2<sup>nd</sup> c CE

- 1 Jupiter is the most benevolent of the planets
2. Jupiter rules Sagittarius, therefore strong, being in Sagittarius.
3. And it's on the ascendant = strong.



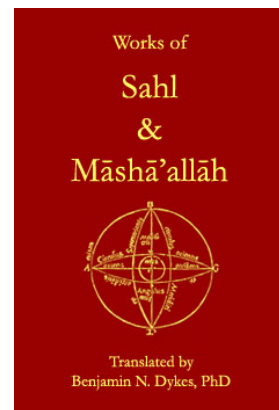
# Checking the texts: Jupiter on the Ascendant



- Julius Firmicus Maternus, Latin, 4<sup>th</sup> century:
- *'if Jupiter is found exactly on the first angle, that is, on the ascendant, especially in those signs in which he rejoices or in his own house or terms or in his exaltation, he will make the native high-born, famous, always ruling great states, perhaps the first ten of the great states. He will also make him...virtuous, charming, benevolent, cheerful, rich, especially if Jupiter is in this house by day...'*
- 
- Maternus, Julius Firmicus, *Mathesis*, translated as *Ancient Astrology: Theory and Practice*, Jean Rhys Bram, Park Ridge, New Jersey: Noyes Press, 1975, III.3.1.
- Masha'allah c.740–815 CE: *'Jupiter, if he were in the Ascendant, signifies reverence and beauty and the honesty of faith and religion, of teaching also, and reason, and the end of those things in which is involved, will be towards salvation, and sovereignty will be handed to him in this'*
- Sahl and Masha'allah, *Works*, trans. Benjamin Dykes, Golden Valley, NM: Cazimi Press, 2008, p. 507.
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# The Sun

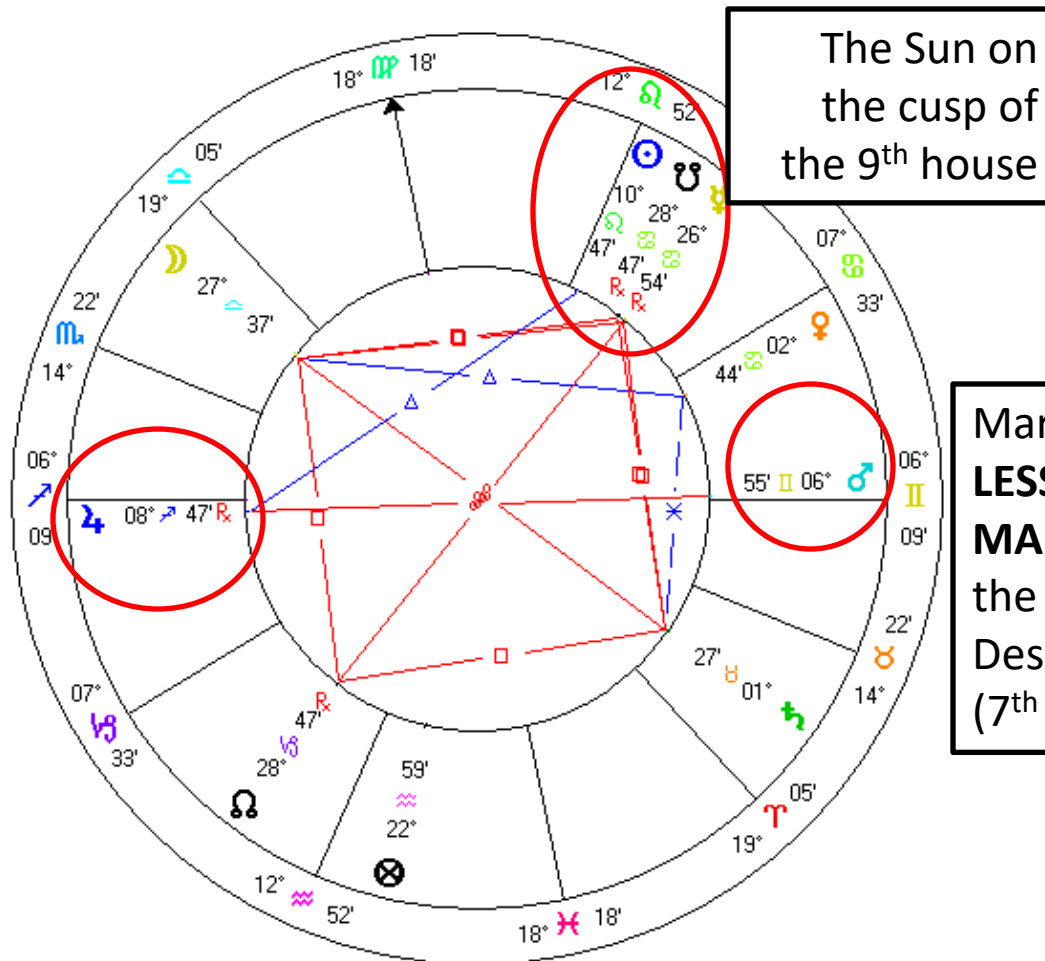


- 1. 'Trine' Jupiter. Ptolemy = harmonious.
- 2. The nature of the Sun
- *'the all-seeing Sun, then, being truly fire-like and the light of the mind, the organ of perception of the soul, is significant at birth for a kingly office, hegemony, mind, practical wisdom, outward form, motion, height of fortune, public registration, action, popular leadership, judgment, father, mastership, friendship, persons of high report, the honors of images, statues and crowns of office, arch-priests of the fatherland..'*
- Valens, Vettius, *The Anthology*, Book 1, I, trans. Robert Schmidt, Berkeley Springs VA, Golden Hind Press 1993.
- 3. In Leo – the nature of Leo
- Leo: the house of the Sun and kingly.
- Hephaistio of Thebes, *Apotelesmatics*, trans. Robert Schmidt, 2 vols., Berkeley Springs WV: Golden Hind Press, 1994, I.1, p. 11.
- 4. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> decan of Leo (10 degrees – 19 degrees 59')
- *'he who is brought forth upon the second decan will be a master, a king; he will be declared a plenipotentiary, and he will subject many and found cities, and many will pay tribute to him, and there will be knowledge of god in him, and the discovery of gold, and his mind will be inspired by him, and his honor equal to the gods*
- *Apotelesmatics*, I.1, p. 12.
-

The problem: Jupiter is occupying a strong place on the horizon,  
but so is Mars

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Tropical  
Placidus  
True Node

Jupiter **THE  
GREAT  
BENEFIC**  
On the  
Ascendant



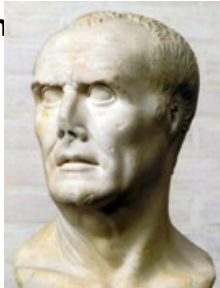
The Sun on  
the cusp of  
the 9<sup>th</sup> house

Mars **THE  
LESSER  
MALEFIC** on  
the  
Descendant  
(7<sup>th</sup> cusp)

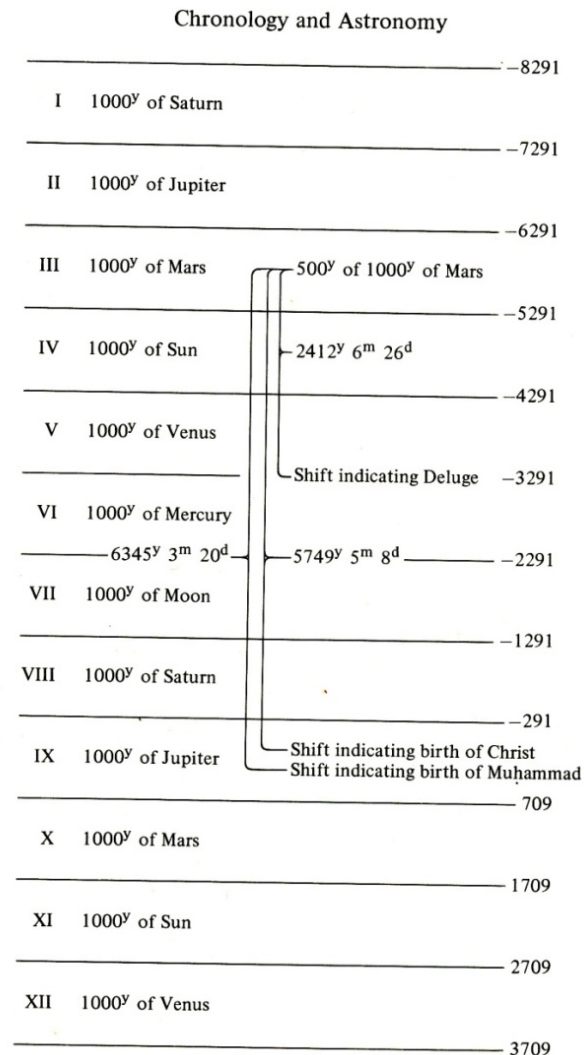


# The Problem of Mars

- Mars in the seventh: 'business dealing and contention and sexual intercourse with injustice, and harm on account of this, and disarray in every matter, and contention and horribly [so], and grief because of them'.
- Sahl and Masha'allah, *Works*, trans. Benjamin Dykes, Golden Valley, NM: Cazimi Press, 2008, p. 510.
- Mars in the 7<sup>th</sup> indicates the greatest evils and enormous perils'.
- Maternus, Julius Firmicus, *Mathesis*, translated as *Ancient Astrology: Theory and Practice*, Jean Rhys Bram, Park Ridge, New Jersey: Noyes Press, 1975, III.4.17.
- 'Jupiter and Mars in opposition indicate an unstable life and continual loss of possessions. Hostility of friends is stirred up, and there is the greatest danger from riots and rash activities'.
- Maternus, Julius Firmicus, *Mathesis*, translated as *Ancient Astrology: Theory and Practice*, Jean Rhys Bram, Park Ridge, New Jersey: Noyes Press, 1975, VI.VXI.1.



# A solution? Masha'allah: planetary rulers for Zoroastrian millennia



- Would being in a Mars period render Mars a positive force?
- There is no textual evidence, but it is a plausible way to think.

# Possible solutions to the Mars problem

**Why did the astrologers choose a (partly) unlucky hour?**

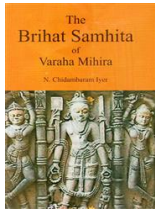
We know that one of the astrologers who advised on the foundation of Baghdad was an Indian by the name of Kanka

In Indian astrology Mars is neutral when Scorpio is in the Ascendant

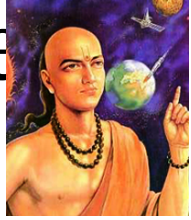
Mars is auspicious when Sagittarius is in the Ascendant

Maharisi Parasara, *Brihat Parasara Hora Sastra*, trans. R. Santhanam, 2 Vols., Ranjan Publications, New Delhi, 1992, chap 34; slokas 35-36 (c.7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries)

If the Indian solution is correct then we might be looking at a cultural composite, using both western and Indian astrology: for example a western zodiac with an Indian rule on Mars.

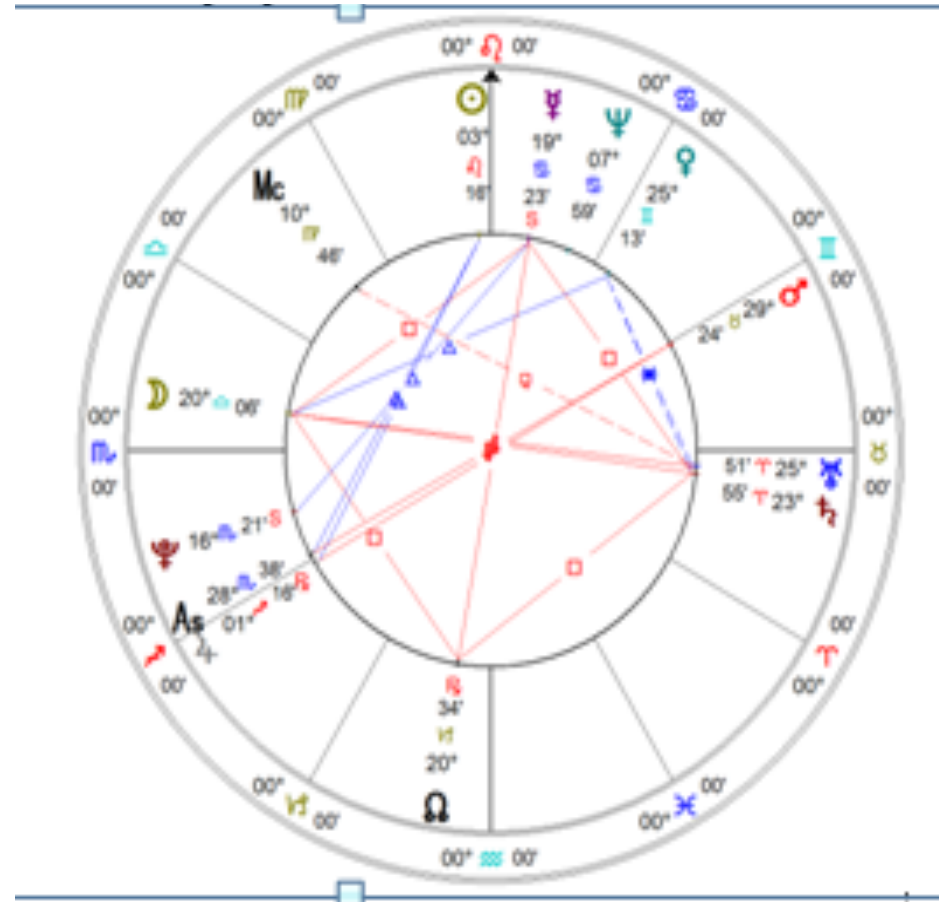


# A possible problem regarding the Indian Solution

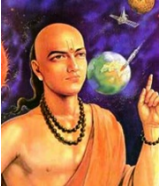


- In the Indian sidereal zodiac, the ascendant would be Scorpio: Jupiter is no longer important.
- Mars moves to Taurus.
- The Indians have different rules for 'electing' auspicious moments.
- Right – the horoscope drawn using the Indian zodiac in use at the time and 'whole sign' houses.
- SOLUTION: Astrology in the eighth century was syncretic. While there was common agreement on general matters such as the number of zodiac signs, their broad meanings and relationships to the planets, there were no commonly agreed systems for handing details. In fact, there were contradictory systems. *There is no reason why an Indian rule could not have been applied to a horoscope cast using Greek zodiac boundaries.*

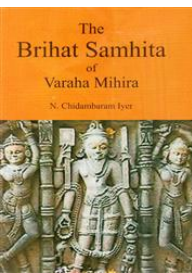
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Fagan-Allen  
Whole Signs  
Mean Node



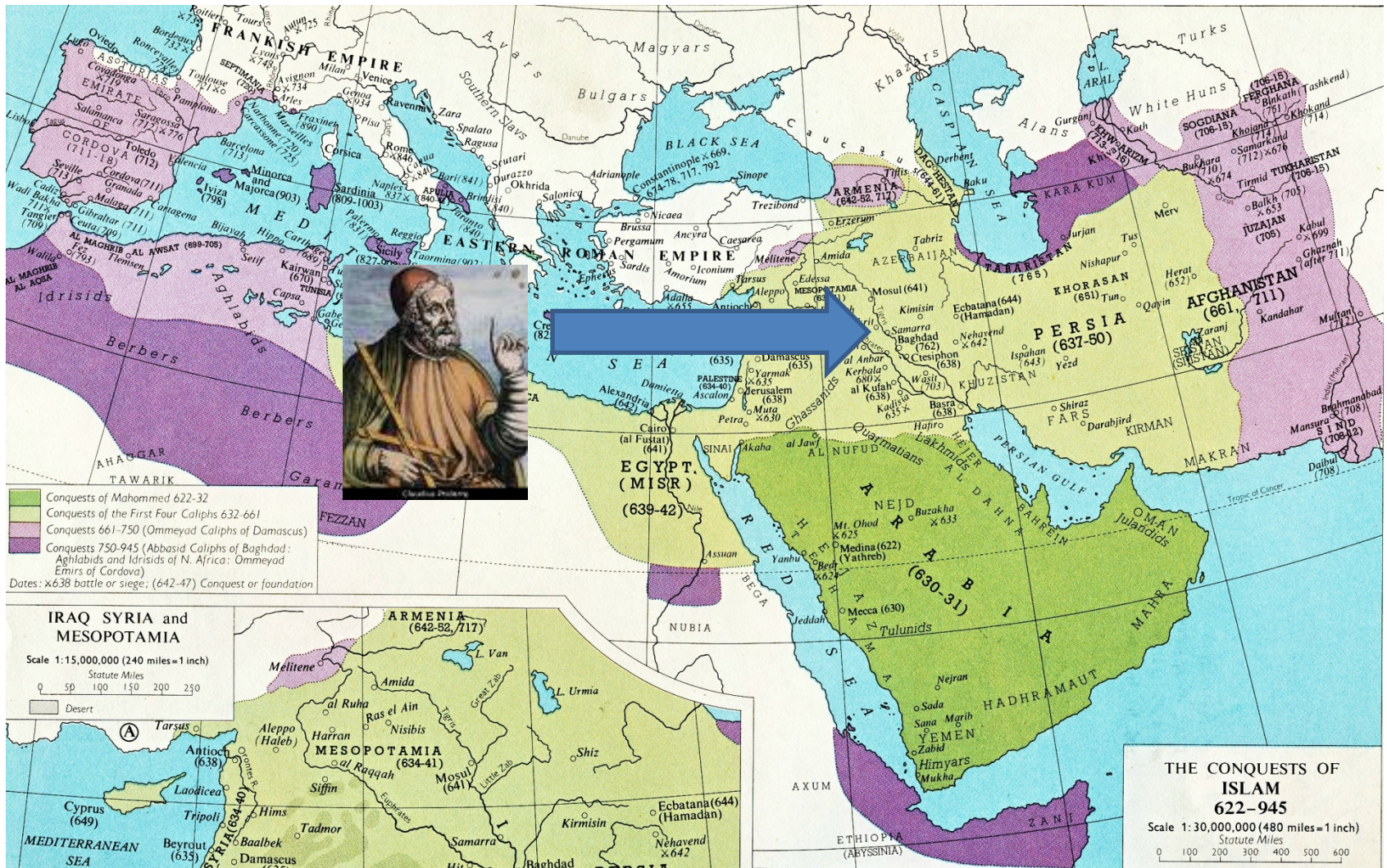
# A possible solution to the possible problem regarding the Indian Solution!



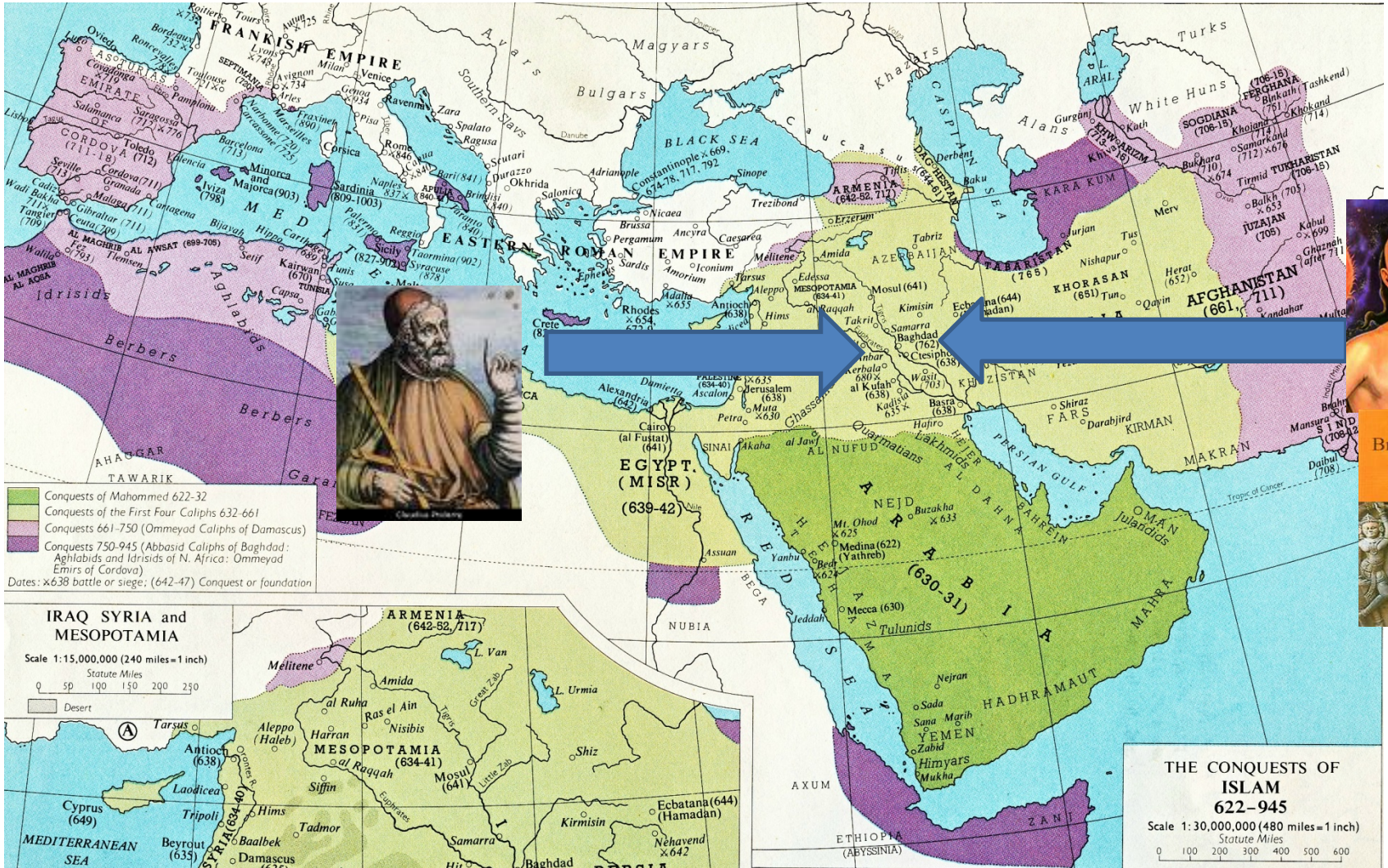
- Mars becomes a benefic planet when Scorpio is rising (in the ascendant), as well as when Sagittarius is rising.
- If the Indian solution is correct then we might be looking at a cultural composite, using both western and Indian astrology: for example a western zodiac with an Indian rule on Mars.



# Was it simpler for astrological/astronomical texts to travel from the Greek world?



# Or India?



# Transmission from Greece and India

Most texts on **astrology** passed into Arabic from Greek.

Pingree, David, 'Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran', *Isis*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Jun., 1963), pp. 229-246.

However, some on **astronomy** were translated in pre-'Abbāsid Persia directly from Sanskrit.

Pingree, David, *The Greek Influence on Early Islamic Mathematical Astronomy*, Journal of the American Oriental Society, 1973, Vol. 93, p. 37.

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# A little theory: Kenneth Olwig

‘A painted landscape is a concrete thing, a signifier’, which signifies an abstract meaning, often a normative conception of the way things ‘naturally’ ought to be if they are to conform to the natural order of things’.

- Kenneth Olwig, ‘Sexual Cosmology: Nation and Landscape at the Conceptual Interstices of Nature and Culture; or What does Landscape Really Mean?’, in Barbara Bender (ed.), *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*, Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 1993, p. 319.
- **We can imagine the cosmological**
- **city of Baghdad as a**
- **‘painted landscape’,**
- **redolent with abstract**
- **meaning**
- 



And lastly, if the Indian solution is correct

- by examining the horoscope for the foundation of Baghdad, we have
- a warning against being too Eurocentric
- a reminder to pay full attention to non-European cultures
- new evidence for the history and practice of astrology
- an insight into the flow of ideas at the time of the beginning of the Islamic ‘Golden Age’
- And evidence for the wider cultural perspectives of 8<sup>th</sup> century Islam, as Gumerman and Warburton suggested.



# Theory: can culture be understood separately to the sky?

‘Researchers who have made a study of past cultures’ interest in and conception of the heavens have often treated the topic narrowly, rather than in the context of the entire culture...**to truly comprehend a culture we must have some sense of its cosmology – the group’s conception of themselves in relation to the heavens.**’

Gumerman and Warburton in John W. Fountain and Rolf M. Sinclair, ed., *Current Studies in Archaeoastronomy: Conversations Across Time and Space* (North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), p.15.

- **‘the practice of observing and making sense of celestial phenomena is as much a cultural activity as any other, and consequently it is equally sensitive to the varied processes of culture change.’**
- Anthony Aveni, *Foundations of New World Cultural Astronomy*, (Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 726-727.



# The Theory of Place

David Harvey: the fundamental importance of time-space relations to social relations. A location in time and space clarifies and determines social relations.

Harvey, David, *The Urban Experience*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 175.

Vincent Berdoulay: 'a place comes explicitly into being in the discourse of its inhabitants, and particularly in the rhetoric it promotes'

Vincent Berdoulay, 'Place, Meaning and Discourse in French Language Geography' in Agnew, John A., and James S. Duncan, *The Power of Place*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1989, p. 135.



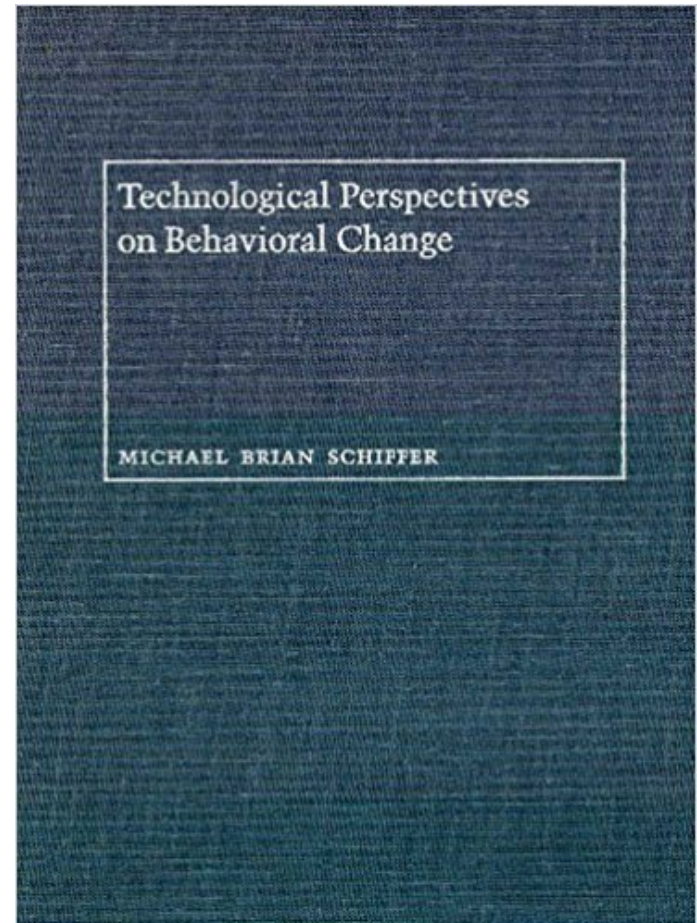
# Questions of Function

**Michael Schiffer (Schiffer, Michael B., *Technological Perspectives on Behavioural Change*. The University of Arizona Press, Tucson and London, 1992, pp. 9-12)**

Schiffer identified three main types of function:

1. technofunction, the utilitarian use of a thing;
2. sociofunction, for example the way in which a thing reveals the social status of its owner;
3. ideofunction, or the way in which a thing symbolizes abstract ideas, values or beliefs, such as religious artefacts.

Then Baghdad has a clear ideofunction: to embody the calendar, and therefore space and time.

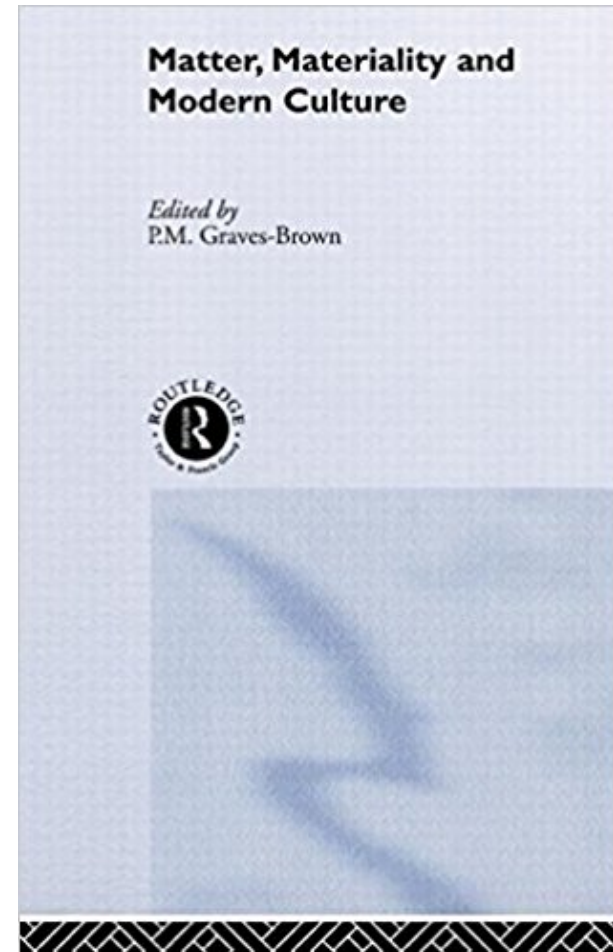


# Questions of Function

**Beth Preston (Preston, Beth, 'The Functions of Things' in P.M. Graves-Brown, (ed.), *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 22-49, (p. 30)**

Preston argued that there is a binary distinction between

1. a proper function, an object's primary intended use,
2. a system function, its additional unintended uses: for example,
  - a chair's proper function is to be a seat, but a system function is to be stood on in order to change a light bulb.
  - Baghdad was designed to be an imperial city, the centre of a vast empire.
  - Or was its proper function to magically instil comic harmony into the lives of those who inhabit it?



# Conclusions



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In certain parts of the world (Mesoamerica, the Hellenistic world, Mesopotamia, Persia, India, China) astronomers developed complex technical and interpretative structures in order to identify divine intention, meaning, purpose and indications about the future by mapping the sky in relation to the earth. Where such sources are available they need to be incorporated into skyscape archaeology

## Further reading

Campion, Nicholas, 'Astronomy and the State: time, space, power and the foundation of Baghdad', in Michael Rappenglück, Barbara Rappenglück and Nicholas Campion (eds.) *Astronomy and Power* (Cambridge: British Archaeology Reports), pp. 233-9.

Allawi, Ibrahim, 'Some Evolutionary and Cosmological Aspects to Early Islamic Town Planning' in Margaret Bentley Sevcenko (ed.), *Theories and Principles of Design in the Architecture of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture 1988, pp. 57-72.

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