

MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
History of Astrology
Week 2
Weekly Description
Astrology in Classical Civilisation
Nick Campion

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

Make sure that you have planned ahead in order to complete the essay deadlines.

Attend the zoom seminar or listen to the recording.

Weekly Description

This week investigates the classical theory and practice of astrology. 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, drawing on Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Greek ideas practice, probably after 200 BCE. The first signs of the presence of Mesopotamian cosmology into 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 class 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) 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.

Philosophical Background

If you are taking this module you have already passed the Introduction module and have a grounding in Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, their cosmologies and consequences for astrology. We are posting the notes from the Introduction module for revision. You will be expected to be able to identify the philosophical context or primary sources in the first assignment.

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 covering the development of astrology in these centuries, which includes almost the entire development of horoscopic astrology between the earliest surviving birth-charts dated to 410 BCE, and the texts of first century CE classical astrology.

Indian Astrology

Indian astrology is not a central part of the week, but as you may consult a wide range of primary sources, it is necessary to be aware that the origins of Indian astrology are the subject of some controversy: Indian astrologers resent the suggestion that their discipline has western origins. The salient points are:

1. There was quite clearly an astrology in India prior to the arrival of Hellenistic culture following Alexander the Great's conquests in the 330s BCE. The main evidence consists of texts concerning rules for the holding of religious rituals and the technical structure of lunar mansions.
2. The evidence for horoscopic astrology occurs only from the 2nd century CE onwards and analysis of the rules of interpretation points to a Hellenistic origin.
3. There is an open question concerning relations between Indian and Mesopotamian culture in the first, second and third millennia BCE. We may suspect a trade in ideas, including cosmology, but the evidence is sparse, if not absent.
4. Contemporary debates on the relationship between Indian and western astrology and their origin tend to be fuelled by anachronistic modern attitudes.

The Astrological Translation Programme

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?

Resources

Course Lecture Notes: Philosophy

Unless you are taking this module as an Occasional Student, you will have studied Plato, Aristotle and the Neoplatonists in the Introduction module. If so you may take this opportunity to revise their theories and significance.

Nick Champion course notes: Plato

Nick Champion course notes: Aristotle

Nick Champion course notes: Neoplatonism.

Nick Champion course notes: Stoicism