

MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
History of Astrology
Week 1: Babylonian astrology and cosmology
Week beginning 14 Feb 2022
Weekly Description
Nick Campion

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

Look at the assessment criteria and essay titles for the module: it is important to plan ahead.

Do the required reading for this week, particularly the primary sources.

Come to the zoom seminar if you can, or listen to the recording.

Weekly Description

The origins of western astrology can be traced through the written records to the civilisations of Mesopotamia in the third millennium BCE, with the earliest omen tablets, dated (although there is debate about their origins) to around 2,200 BCE. Though the extant 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 the development of the birth chart in the fifth century BCE down to the Hellenistic period, after 331 BCE. This week's material will examine this process. We will raise questions concerning astrology's origins, nature, development, social and political functions.

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

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

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?

Reading: looking ahead

Each week there will be three strands to the Reading:

1. Primary sources. It is essential for historians to work with primary source documents, which provide a major strand of original evidence.
2. Secondary sources: the scholarly work which interprets and the primary sources and constructs historical theories on the basis of the primary sources.
3. Historiographical secondary sources. Historiography is the study of the writing of history and the theoretical perspectives adopted by historians. Each week one chapter from Richard Evans ' *In Defence of History* will be required, along with one or two texts which debate the historiography of astrology.

In your second essay you are required to use primary sources, secondary sources and to refer to historiographical issues

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.