

MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Astrology, History, Spirit and Soul
Week 5

Weekly Description: Astrology in Medieval Europe
Nick Campion

Purpose of the Week

To gain a critical understanding of the nature and role of astrology in Medieval Europe.

Tasks this week

- Read the required reading and review the optional reading, looking at what may be useful as additional reading now or in the future.
- Watch Chris's pre-recorded lecture on Astrology in the Medieval World.
- Make sure that you have planned ahead for the assignment deadlines.
- Prepare for next week's seminar discussion.
- Attend the zoom seminar or, listen to the recording if you are unable to attend.

Weekly Description

This week deals with issues in astrology in the long Medieval period, defined broadly as being between the end of the Roman Empire in western Europe in the 5th/6th centuries to the Renaissance of the 15th century. Although horoscopic astrology died out in western Europe in the late fifth century CE following the collapse of the Roman empire (in Western Europe – it survived in the east) and the virtual end of literacy (except in the monasteries), combined with the impact of profound opposition from Christianity, some basic astronomical and astrological knowledge survived. We will cover this period. A major shift occurred beginning in the twelfth century (the 1100s) when horoscopic astrology was reintroduced into western Europe following the translation of former Greek and classical texts mainly from Arabic into medieval Latin, along with major works from the Islamic world. This week deals with astrology in the European Middle Ages, the translation of astrological and Aristotelian astronomical texts into Latin and its repercussions, including the reconciliation between astrology and Christianity engineered by

Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. We will raise questions concerning the relationship between classical philosophy and medieval Christianity on the one hand, and between cosmological models and the practical uses of astrology on the other.

You should note that you are NOT expected to cover all the week's material. Instead, having tackled the required reading you should use this material as an on-line library, pursuing your interests.

The Soul

issues concerning the soul, ran to the heart of astrology in the mediaeval European world from the twelfth century onwards, by which we mainly mean, Western Europe: France, Germany, Italy, Spain and England. It was absolutely central to Christianity that the individual could make a free choice to follow Jesus Christ and guarantee eternal life for their immortal soul. It was therefore a major problem when translations from Arabic of Aristotle's works, along with astrological texts which adopted an Aristotelian philosophy, were translated into Latin and became available to European scholars. These texts all assumed that the soul was embedded in the natural world. Even though astrologers such as Ptolemy insisted that freedom of choice and action coexisted with the world of astrological influences, the soul was nevertheless subject to planetary influence. This meant that the individual's ability to choose the path of Christ and salvation was conditioned by their birth chart and ongoing planetary movements, and therefore compromised. And yet the naturalistic tone of Aristotle's writing, as well as of texts, such as the *Tetrabiblos*, were tremendously, persuasive for many scholars because they provided a path to study the natural world which was not available through scripture and mainstream catholic Christian theology.

The solution to the soul problem was worked out by a number of theologians, including Albertus Magnus and his student Thomas Aquinas: Thomas is perhaps the more influential because his writings were more extensive. The solution that Albertus and Thomas worked out, was that planetary influences, only act directly on the body. They can then act indirectly on the soul, but the individual has the choice as to whether to give in to influences expressed through the body, or resist them. The inner world is therefore not directly part of the astrological universe. Therefore, only people who do not lead a devout, Christian life, are subject to planetary influences, and hence to astrological fate.

Individuals who lead a devout and Christian life are free from planetary inference.

This solution is not totally original: it is contained within the Hermetic and Neoplatonic traditions. However, Albertus and Thomas only had very limited access to Platonic and Hermetic works, and we can see in their writings the way in which they worked out their solution in a very logical manner by appealing to classical authorities such as Aristotle. Thomas argued that the Active Intellect, which Aristotle hints is immortal, is equivalent to the immortal, Christian soul. He therefore managed to invoke Aristotle in support of the proposition that the soul is not subject to planetary influence, contrary to the Ptolemaic position.

The conventional formula for this theory, is that the wise man rules his stars, but the fool obeys them. This same formula is present in modern astrology, particularly in some psychological astrology. The soul problem did not bother many practising astrologers. However, it was vital in providing a Christian justification for astrology, and hence protection for astrologers, even though many Christian theologians, continued to express hostility to astrology in the form of the casting of horoscopes.

Alchemy: for space reasons we are not including alchemy as a separate topic. However, one way to see alchemy is as a practical application of the astrological worldview. It is possible for you to develop this in the optional reading, if appropriate. A good initial online resource is The Alchemy website, <http://www.alchemywebsite.com/index.html>

Thought for the week: is medieval astrology related to medieval cosmology?

Tutors Notes

General Cosmology

Nick's Notes on Classical Cosmology in the Medieval World (revising Plato and Aristotle)

Nick's notes on Medieval Cosmology

Nick's notes on Christian Cosmology

Nick's notes on Thomas Aquinas

Astrology

Please remember that you are NOT supposed to be learning the complex techniques of medieval astrology. That said, if you have a background in this area or wish to develop it, you can do so. The exploration of astrological techniques is itself a cultural exercise.

Bernadette's Notes on Medieval Astrology: Aspect Theory

Bernadette's Notes on Medieval Astrology: Almutens

Bernadette's Notes on Medieval Astrology: Glossary of Terms