

A Golden Thread: The Transmission of Western Astrology Through Cultures By Demetra George

Most contemporary practitioners and adherents of astrology assume that the kind of astrology that is generally taught and practiced today is the way it has always been done. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The discipline of western astrology has gone through many transformations in its four thousand year recorded history as it has passed through the cultures of the Babylonia, India, Persia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Islam, Medieval and Renaissance Europe, Seventeenth century through Victorian England, and twentieth century America. At each stage, these various cultures adapted the doctrines of astrology to the world views of their own societies and philosophies, and, in the process, mistranslated, misunderstood, and deleted, while sometimes innovating and improving upon what was inherited from their predecessors. Let us take a brief journey through time and follow the track of this ancient wisdom that refuses to be denied and forgotten.

Mesopotamian Origins

Just as the fourth millennium Tigris-Euphrates river valley is generally accepted as the cradle of civilization with the invention of writing, so among the earliest cuneiform texts are the astrological omens, the seedbed of the western astrological tradition. Throughout the Babylonian and Assyrian (second and first millenniums B.C.E.) cultures, the planets were considered to be one of the manifestations of their gods, and their movements and appearances were thought to reveal the intentions of the gods. Astrologer-priests meticulously observed and recorded the omens of the planetary gods and conveyed this information to the kings so that they might rule the land in accordance with divine intention. An example of a Babylonian omen (always expressed as a protasis and apodosis - an if/then statement) from the *Enuma Anu Enlil* is:

The Fox is breaking into houses.

If Mars approaches the Scorpion: there will be a breach in the palace of the prince.

If Mars approaches the Scorpion: the city will be taken through a breach.¹

In addition, all celestial and meteorological phenomena such as comets, meteors, haloes, eclipses, thunder, and lightning were considered to be portents of the future. However, this was not a fixed future, but a possible future. There existed many apotropaic rituals, *namburbis*, as imprecations to the gods entreating them to reverse their minds and avert the portended disaster. In this way Mesopotamian astrology was neither deterministic nor fatalistic.²

At the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E., the Persians were the overlords of Mesopotamia and their conquests extended into the Indus Valley of northern India. The earliest omen texts in India appear to have been influenced by

the Babylonian texts, emphasizing pacification rituals to appease the anger of the gods and included similar protases of the *Enuma Anu Enlil*. Traces of these omens are also found in the Buddhist texts of this period, and were carried by Buddhist missionaries to Central Asia, China, Tibet, Japan, and Southeast Asia.³

During the rule of the Achaemenid Persians in the following century, the first horoscope of an individual birth was documented. For the previous 1,500 years, all the astrological omens were of a general nature (the term used today is mundane), that is, expressed in the form of simple if/then statements concerning the welfare of the king and the land. It is not until 410 BCE do we find evidence of a new kind of astrology, genethiological or natal – looking to the positions of the planets in the signs or on the horizon at the time of a child's birth in order to make a statement about the character and destiny of that person. However, the interpretative texts from this period reveal a similar simple omen format, nothing more complex than the rising and setting of the planets.

If a child is born when Venus comes forth and Jupiter has set, his wife will be stronger than he.⁴

Hellenistic Outpouring

The extensive conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century, his early death, and division of his kingdom among his generals opened the way for the Greek colonization of Mesopotamia and Egypt. When the Greeks and Macedonians arrived in the lands of the ancient Near East, they encountered a 2,000 year old astrological tradition based upon a rich astral theology. Although the Greeks of the Classical period – such as Plato and his student the astronomer Eudoxos – were certainly aware of Chaldean astrology (Babylonian astrology of the sixth century B.C.E.), there is no evidence of its practice on the Greek mainland.⁵ However the Greek philosophers were developing theories about the natural world such as the relationship between the macrocosm and microcosm, the four elements, the metaphysical meanings of numbers and geometric shapes, and the alternation of polarities; these theories would lay a philosophical foundation for the eventual acceptance of astrology in the Greco-Roman world.

Berosus, a Babylonian priest of Bel and a contemporary of Alexander the Great, carried his astrological knowledge to the Greek island of Kos where he opened the first astrology school for the Greeks in 290 BCE. From there, Chaldean astrology made its way to the nearby cities of Asia Minor and to Rome. Even more significant for the Western tradition was the importation of the Chaldean to the Greek Ptolemaic kingdom in Egypt, where the notion that the position of the stars at birth indicated a person's destiny served to precipitate an entire new formulation of the astrological discipline. There, in the middle of the second century B.C.E., a sudden explosion of astrological thought occurred. Alexandria was the new cosmopolitan capitol of the Hellenistic world, and the Museum and Library attracted intellectuals from many cultures whose common language was Greek.

A comprehensive textbook of horoscopic astrology – allegedly written by Nechepso and Petosris, an Egyptian pharaoh and his priest, who attributed the teachings to a divine revelation by Hermes – contained a highly sophisticated and complex body of astrological doctrines, radically different from the earlier Babylonian material. It was written in the Greek language, based upon Greek philosophical and astronomical concepts, and included elements of Egyptian astronomy, culture and religion. Within a period of less than one hundred years, astrology had been transformed from simple if/then statements to an integrated system that included the following innovations: various types of planetary rulership; signs classified according to gender, quadruplicity and triplicity; topical meanings of houses, with specific ascending and culminating degrees; aspects; lots; methods for determining the conditions of longevity, marriage, health, children, parents, siblings, finances, reputation, profession, and a wide variety of timing techniques and time lords.

Here is an excerpt from the *Anthology*⁶ of Vettius Valens to illustrate the degree of complexity that had developed in astrological procedures within a few hundred-year period from those of Mesopotamia to what was being disseminated in Egypt.

Concerning Siblings

When the Sun is marking the hour, it makes for few siblings or the lack of siblings. When Kronos is setting, it makes for the lack of siblings or few siblings. Zeus and Hermes and Aphrodite upon pivots are bestowers of siblings; but when Kronos is opposed, it destroys an older brother. When Kronos chances to be with Ares, it slays siblings or makes them weak. When Aphrodite and the Moon are familiar with the third place from the Hour-Marker (which is the place of siblings), they will give sisters, and especially if the zoidion is feminine. And if the Sun, Zeus, Hermes, chancing to be in a masculine zoidion, are [familiar] with the third place, they give male siblings. When the destroyers witness the place of siblings, they destroy the siblings who are already born, or make for the lack of siblings or few siblings--if they are poorly situated. When the benefics witness the place of siblings, they not only give siblings, but make them good [for the native]. When the star of Ares is busy with the place of siblings and is well situated--especially when it is being witnessed by a benefic and especially when it looks upon the Moon--it becomes a bestower of siblings. And some take the place of siblings as a lot: by day [the interval] from Kronos to Zeus, by night the reverse, and an equal amount [projected] from the Hour-Marker (II.40)

The corpus of Hellenistic astrology contains within it all the fundamental principles and techniques of the Medieval Arabic and Latin, Classical and Modern traditions. Some of the names of the historical forefathers who shaped the discipline over the first four centuries C.E. are Dorotheus of Sidon, Teucer of Babylon, Vettius Valens of Antioch, Claudius Ptolemy – an Egyptian born Roman citizen, Antiochus of Athens, Paulus of Alexandria, Hephaistio of Thebes, and Firmicus Maternus. While only one of these astrologers was ethnically Greek, all of the texts with the exception of the *Mathesis* of Firmicus Maternus, were

written in Greek, the literary language of the Roman Empire. With the Roman conquest of Egypt in the first century B.C.E., this Hellenistic astrology became diffused throughout the expanses of the Empire, including the areas of Syria and Palestine. In particular, the ancient city of Harran which had been a sacred site of the Babylonian Moon God Sin, and where Abraham came to find his wife was known for centuries as the stronghold of pagan hermetic mystery cults and supplied many astrologers for both the Persian and Arabic courts.

Supported by the influential Stoic philosophy, with its belief in the possibility of divination, astrology became accepted by the Roman intelligentsia and was used extensively by the early Roman Emperors.⁷ The Stoic notion that each person is born with a certain fate became incorporated into the astrological view whereby the planets became the agents of that irrevocable fate in human destiny. Astral religions such as Mithraism, spiritualizing philosophies such as Hermeticism and Gnosticism, and the development of a body of astral magic were all attempts to help the individual escape or become liberated after death from this fate decreed by the stars.

Also, in the late first century B.C., direct trade routes by sea opened up between Egypt and India, and with the Greek trading colonies in India and Indian trading colonies in Alexandria, it is very likely that a transmission of astronomy and astrology occurred both ways from Greco-Roman Egypt and India.⁸ There exist transliterations of many Greek technical astrological terms in Sanskrit that have no independent etymology in the Sanskrit language.⁹ It is highly possible that Indian astrologers incorporated elements of Hellenistic astrology into their own indigenous tradition, one that already had received an influx of Babylonian celestial omen divination as well.

Hellenistic astrology was also transmitted to the courts of Persia under the Sassanian rulers (226-632 C.E.), beginning in the third century C.E. The previous Greek rulers of Mesopotamia, as well as the Persian Parthians who followed them as overlords of this area, had allowed the Chaldean astrologers to continue practicing their art, although the astrologers were not utilized as advisors to the kings as they had been during the Babylonian and Assyrian periods. However, the Sassasians, another tribe from Persia who restored the ancient Zoroastrian religion, were very interested in using astrology for a political agenda. According to their own records, the early kings had translations made of the astrological works of Hermes, Dorotheus, Ptolemy, Qidrus the Greek, and Farmasab the Indian.¹⁰ Evidence exists for the translations of Valens and Teucer as well.

Sojourn to the Islamic World

By the fourth century C.E., Christianity had been declared the official state religion of the Roman Empire; a wave of anti-pagan polemics by the Church Fathers and legislators condemning the practice of astrology resulted in the gradual suppression of the discipline. With the fall of the Western Roman Empire to the Germanic tribes, knowledge of the Greek language was lost – and with it,

the capacity to have access to any of the astrological works. In the Eastern Byzantine Empire, Greek was still retained and the astrological texts were preserved in the monastic and imperial libraries, but secular and Church law made it increasingly forbidden for anyone to read the texts. The decree of Emperor Justinian in 529 C.E. that closed the philosophical schools led many pagan scholars to find refuge in the liberal intellectual court of the Sassanian King Khusro Anushirwan (531-78) at Jundishapur in Persia.

Many scientific and philosophical works were translated into the Persian language (Pahlavi) by an international community of scholars including the heretic Nestorian Christians, Jews, Greeks, Syrians, Egyptians, Romans, Chinese, and Indians. There was a massive revision of astrological texts during this period, and many innovations to the discipline were made by Persian astrologers who combined elements from their own Zoroastrian background, along with both the Hellenistic and Indian traditions; the latter had adapted Hellenistic astrology to the Vedic philosophy, religion, and the Indian social caste system.

The Persian astrologers had applied natal techniques to general (mundane) astrology, and attempted to determine past and future history – the fates of nations and dynasties – by astrological methods such as the Jupiter/Saturn cycle, the Aries ingress chart, and long-scale planetary periods and sub-periods adapted from the Greek periods and applied to the Zoroastrian theory of the millennia and the Indian theory of the *yugas* of the planets. These techniques made astrology a potential source of political propaganda by which to predict the future victories or defeats of rulers and dynasties – and to justify the legitimacy of the current rulers as ordained by the stars.

In 632 C.E., the Persian dynasty fell to the conquest of the Arabs, who at that time were simple nomadic peoples without a rich literary culture of their own. However, they soon saw the value of the intellectual and artistic achievements of their new subjects, and wanted it for themselves. So began another period of translation activity, with a particular interest in science, medicine, philosophy, but the astrological texts were translated first of all.¹¹ The Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur (754-75) employed Persian astrologers, one of whom was the young Masha'Allah, to determine the foundation chart for his new capital of Baghdad (July 31, 762 about 2:40 pm LMT).¹² The caliph and his sons instituted a formal research center, the House of Wisdom, where a multitude of works of the ancient Greeks and Hellenized Persians were translated into Arabic and thus preserved. Again, rulers used astrology to legitimize the authority of their new dynasty, as well as to time their military and political actions.

The earliest astrological works that were translated from Persian Pahlavi versions of the Greek to the Arabic included Hermes, Dorotheus, Teucer, and Ptolemy's *Almagest*, and Valens. When the Pahlavi sources were depleted, raiding parties were sent to Byzantium for Greek texts, and several translations of Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* were then made. Because of Ptolemy's stature in

astronomy, he soon came to dominate the astrological scene, with Dorotheus a close second. Many Indian astrological and astro-medical texts were also translated into Arabic.

The following centuries saw the golden age of Arabic astrology, with authors from all over the Islamic empire, writing in Arabic. The astrology of the Greeks, Persians, and Indians became amalgamated and elaborated upon by such astrologers as Abu Ali Al-Khayat, Al-Kindi, Abu Ma'shar, and Al-Biruni.¹³ The Neoplatonic theory of the various stages of emanations from the One and the Aristotelian structure of the cosmos, with the supposition that all terrestrial change was caused by celestial motions, were grafted onto the astrology to give it a philosophical and spiritual foundation detailing the soul's ascent back to the Source. By the eleventh century there were hundreds of Arabic works on astrology by dozens of authors. Many changes were made to the doctrine, including different approaches to house systems, aspects, rulerships, and the addition of many Arabic parts to the Greek system of lots and the 28 lunar mansions derived from the 27 Indian *nakshratas*. The Arabic period saw the rise and popularity of interrogational (horary) astrology, which was especially influenced by the Indian developments to this area.

Reintroduction to the West

During the brilliance of the Arabic period between the seventh and tenth centuries, the Western world was in the midst of its Dark Ages. Most of the knowledge of the Greco-Roman cultures had been long since forgotten, and astrology survived in several literary works only as a distant memory of something evil and now forbidden. However, in the tenth century Arabic astrological works began to trickle into the Eastern Empire at Byzantium where they were translated into Greek –not only the original Hellenistic works that had gone through Persian and Arabic translations, but also the new works of the Arabic astrologers themselves. There are reports that astrology flourished in the courts of the Komnenoi Emperors. Manuel I (1118-80) used astrology extensively in his political affairs and composed a Christian defense of it addressed to the Church Patriarch.¹⁴ This defense sparked a refutation by a theologian Michael Glykas, and the debate over the “problem of astrology” was once again revived, after having been in a state of slumber for 700 years. Since the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

Meanwhile, in the West, the wealth of the Arabic astrological literature had found its way to the Moorish libraries and bookshops in southern Spain, which was under Moorish rule. When Latin Christendom conquered Spain in 1085, that opened the door for Latin scholars to partake of the Classical heritage that had been preserved by the Arabs – as well as the Arab's own rich intellectual tradition. Again the very first works to be translated were the astrological treatises. Translators such as John of Seville, Hugh of Santella, Plato of Tivoli, Hermann of Dalmatia, Robert of Chester, and many others flocked to Spain and brought dozens of Arabic astrological texts that cited the works of Dorotheus,

Ptolemy, Hermes, etc. into Latin translation, and they then began writing their own compendia.¹⁵

It should be noted that there was no extant Arabic translation of Valens available for Latin translation, even though Arabic sources cite that he had been translated into both Pahlavi and Arabic. The great Hellenistic astrologers Paulus Alexandrinus, Antiochus of Athens, and Hephaistio of Thebes had not been transmitted to the Arabs; hence, their works were unknown to the Medieval Latinists. However, Latin copies of Firmicus Maternus had survived underground in Europe during the early Middle Ages.

At the beginning of the twelfth century, there was virtually no technical knowledge of astrology in Western Europe. However, by the end of the century, there were hundreds of translations and new works by Latin astrologers. Everyone was talking about the forthcoming conjunction of planets in Libra in 1186. Coupled with Aristotle's natural philosophy, a view emerged of astrology as one of the natural sciences whose study, by means of the rational intellect, could lead to an understanding of the divine workings of the cosmos.

Thus the Medieval astrology of the 13th and 14th centuries as articulated by the great Guido Bonatti and Leopold of Austria, was dependent upon the Latin translations of the Arabic treatises, which in turn were formulated from the Persian and Indian adaptations of some (but not all) of the Hellenistic texts authored over 1,000 years earlier. Meanwhile in the Byzantium, from the twelfth century on thousands of astrological manuscripts were compiled, and in the 14th century John Abramios and his student Eleutherios Zebelanos revised many of the Classical and Byzantine texts. Because the texts were recopied and recopied, they have been preserved, but because they were revised, portions of the original tradition have been obscured.

During the Late Middle Ages, with the proliferation of the Arabic translations, the Church became alarmed by the influence of Greek and Islamic philosophers upon theology, and sought to purge the Arabic element from the theological teachings. There were also debates among astrologers themselves about the relative merits of the Arabic doctrines that emphasized the Jupiter-Saturn cycles in preference for the Greek doctrines promoted by Ptolemy that used eclipses in prognostications; this controversy came to a head in astrological predictions about the Black Death.¹⁶ The Arabs were seen as a political threat as well, but the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 resulted in the influx of Greek scholars and texts to Italy, contributing to the rebirth of Classical paganism, that characterized the Renaissance. The Arabic *Picatrix*, a text of astral magic, and Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* opened the way for the proliferation of a hermetic magical astrology; this movement existed side by side with the practice of a more scientific astrology that was derived directly from the

Classical Greek tradition. There ensued a movement to purify astrology from its magical affiliations, and reframe it as more scientific.

The work of Claudius Ptolemy, based upon Aristotelian natural philosophy, was championed as a more scientific tradition, and in the 16th century, Greek manuscripts that had not passed through Arabic translations became available. It is an irony of history that Ptolemy himself, a native Egyptian, was most likely not a practicing astrologer, but rather an academic who compiled all the knowledge of his day, and that the contents of the *Tetrabiblos* were not part of the mainstream Hellenistic astrological doctrines. However Ptolemy's work became an important reference for the Classical Renaissance tradition that was to become so influential in the work of William Lilly and 17th century astrologers, both in England and on the Continent.

There had been great debates about the legitimacy of astrology as a proper subject of study within a Christian world-view, but no one questioned whether celestial influences had an impact upon terrestrial events. With the acceptance of Copernicus' heliocentric model of the cosmos, astrology (which had been grounded in Aristotelian natural philosophy) lost its scientific rationale, and fell into disrepute over the 18th and 19th centuries. The intellectual circles no longer deemed astrology worthy as a topic of discussion. The tradition once again went underground and became diluted and diffused.

Across the Great Waters

The end of the nineteenth century was marked by several movements that would all contribute to the resurrection of astrology, albeit in a new form. The Spiritualist movement's search for the unseen causes behind manifest phenomena, the Theosophical movement which brought the Eastern doctrines of karma and reincarnation to the West, and the discovery of the psychological unconscious all served to stimulate a renewed interest in astrology as a tool for self-realization and self-understanding. The concepts embedded in these systems of thought would lead to a 20th century humanistic, psychological, and spiritual astrology where the birth chart was now viewed as the map of the psyche and soul, rather than the events fated to befall the native. This reconstruction, begun on the European Continent and especially in England, would make its way to America and be taken up by yet another culture.

Another movement that was taking place in European academic circles at the close of the 19th century would have an equally significant impact on the future of the astrological discipline. A small group of scholars, led by the Belgian Franz Cumont, a historian of astrology, embarked upon a program to collect and edit all of the Greek astrological manuscripts that lay scattered throughout the libraries, monasteries, and private collections in Europe and Russia. The result of this painstaking and laborious work was the twelve-volume *Catalog of Greek Astrological Codices* (CCAG) that took 50 years to assemble. However, until

recently, there was not anyone in the academic community fluent in ancient Greek interested in bringing these texts into English translation.

There was an English version of Manilius' Latin *Astronomica* as early as 1697, but this work was more of a poetic piece of literature than a technical manual. Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* received an English translation in 1940 by F.E. Robbins, and the *Mathesis*, the Latin work of Firmicus Maternus, was partially translated into English by Jean Rhys Bram in 1975. David Pingree produced an English version of Dorotheus' *Pentateuch* in 1976, but this was directly from the Arabic translation of the Persian translation of the original Greek. These texts constituted the extent of our limited direct knowledge of the contents of the ancient Hellenistic astrological texts until the last decade of the 20th century

It was left to the astrological community to reclaim its own history. In 1993, three outstanding men from the astrological community – Robert Schmidt, Robert Hand, and Robert Zoller – initiated a project to translate the corpus of ancient astrological material from Latin and Greek into English. Hand and Zoller have brought many Latin works from the Medieval tradition into English translation, and Schmidt has now translated the majority of the works of the Hellenistic astrologers.¹⁷ This labor is perhaps the most monumental achievement of this century.

For the first time since their composition in antiquity, the works of the great Hellenistic astrologers – such as Vettius Valens, Paulus Alexandrinus, Antiochus of Athens, Hephaistio of Thebes, Anonymous 379, a new edition of Claudius Ptolemy, and fragments of many other minor authors found in the CCAG – are available to be read, studied, and mined for their insights into the construction of the original tradition. Hellenistic astrology spawned all of the subsequent Western astrological traditions, whether that of the Persians, Arabs, Medieval Europeans, the Classical Renaissance, or modern astrology. Contemporary astrologers are on the brink of one of the most exciting periods of astrological history, as they are at the vanguard of the kinds of renaissances in astrological thought that historically have taken place whenever the writings of the Greeks have been rediscovered and translated.

The reclamation of the primary sources of ancient astrology will serve to acknowledge and restore astrology's position as a major component of the intellectual, religious, philosophical and scientific history of civilization.

¹ *Enuma Anu Enlil*, Tablets 50-51, translated by Erica Reiner with David Pingree. Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1981, p. 41.

² For an excellent discussion of Babylonian astrology, see Nicholas Campion, "Babylonian Astrology: Its Origin and Legacy in Europe," in *Astronomies Across Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin (Kluwer Academic Press, 2000)

³ David Pingree, *From Astral Omens to Astrology* (Rome: Istituto Italiano Per Africa E Oriente, 1997), pp. 30-31.

⁴ Abraham Sachs, "Babylonian Horoscopes," in *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 6 (1952), p. 69.

⁵ For a discussion of the awareness of astrology in Greece, see Robin Waterfield, "The Evidence for Astrology in Classical Greece," *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 3 no. 2, Autumn-Winter 1999, pp. 3-15.

⁶ Vettius Valens, *The Anthology*, trans. Robert Schmidt (Berkeley Springs, WV: The Golden Hind Press, 1994), II.40.

⁷ Frederick Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1954).

⁸ Pingree, *Astral Omens*, p. 33.

⁹ See David Pingree, ed., trans., and commentator on *The Yavanajayaka of Sphujidhvaja* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

¹⁰ David Pingree, *The Thousands of Abu Ma' Shar* (London: The Warburg Institute University of London, 1968), pp. 7-10.

¹¹ See Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998).

¹² See James H. Holden, "The Foundation Chart of Baghdad," <http://cura.free.fr/xxv/25hold3.html>.

¹³ For a discussion of Arabic astrologers, see James Herschel Holden, *A History of Horoscopic Astrology* (Tempe, AZ, American Federation of Astrologers, 1996), pp. 99-148.

¹⁴ For a translation and commentary, see Demetra George, "Manuel I Komnenos and Michael Glykas: A Twelfth Century Defense and Refutation of Astrology," in *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 5 no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2001); and 2 (Autumn/Winter 2001); Vol. 6. no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2002).

¹⁵ Francis J. Carmody, *Arabic Astronomical and Astrological Sciences in Latin Translation: A critical Bibliography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956).

¹⁶ For a discussion, see *Levi ben Gerson's Pronostication for the Conjunction of 1345*, trans. Bernard R. Goldstein and David Pingree (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1990), Volume 80, Part 6.

¹⁷ Robert Schmidt has nearly completed *The Book of Hermes*, his reconstruction of Hellenistic astrology and *The System of Hermes: A Basic Course in the Practice of Hellenistic Astrology* (48 90-minute cassette tapes). Contact phaser@mindspring.com for more information.