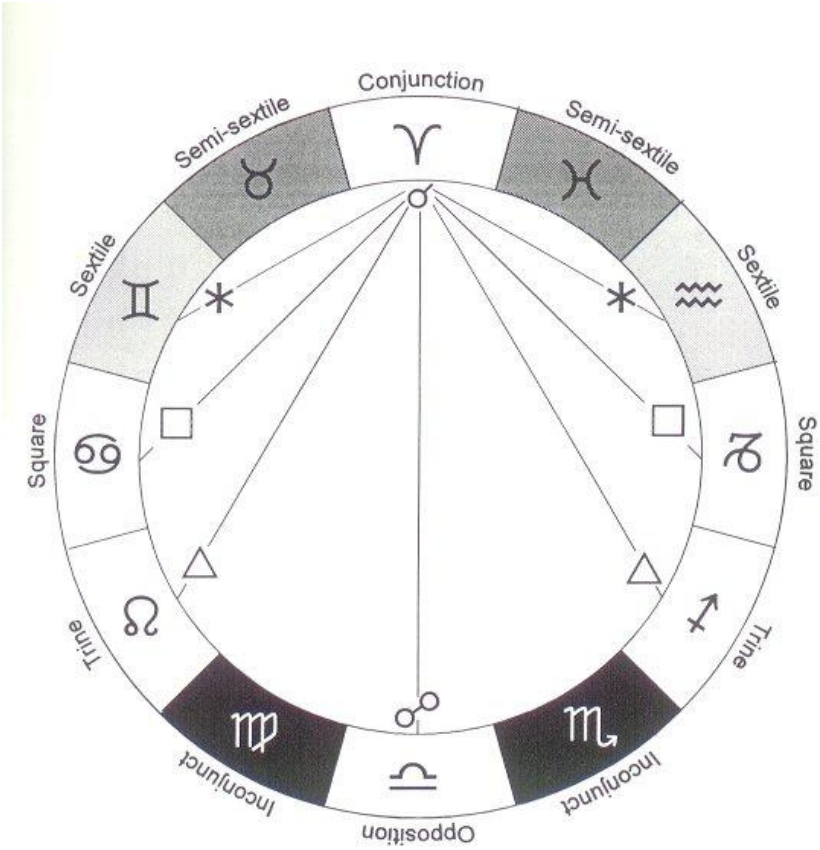
CLASSICAL ORIGIN OF ASPECTS

By Deborah Houlding

The word *aspect* comes from the Latin *aspicio,* 'to regard'. It is first encountered during the Middle Ages but before this similar words were used to say that the planets 'regarded', 'beheld', 'viewed', 'looked at', 'witnessed' or 'saw' each other. Some traditional texts tell us that it is not correct to call the conjunction an aspect, the reason being that conjoining planets do not view each other, they meet. The term is usually prefixed by the word *corporeal* ('bodily'), emphasising that the union is a physical one rather than a blending of rays. Some astrologers argued that the term was only appropriate when the event occurred upon similar parallels of celestial latitude although more often it was used for planets joined by celestial longitude alone.[1]



Most of today's minor aspects did not exist in early astrology. The fact that they are unable to inscribe a shape within the zodiac wheel invalidates them according to the principles of ancient astrology. Only two of them have a classical history: the semi-sextile and the inconjunct (quincunx). For the most part the semi-sextile was dismissed as too weak to be of noticeable influence, the reason being that the angle between the signs is too obtuse to allow a clear line of vision between the planets: *'Their attentions are bestowed on distant signs which they can see',* said Manilius.[2] Where it was used, the aspect was taken to imply a condition of vague familiarity; a relationship which was unlikely to bring about a dynamic event on its own account.

Inconjunct (literally *unconnected*) was the name applied to planets placed five signs apart. With the absence of any physical shape to connect their signs, the term itself suggests a state of natural aversion. Such a relationship was considered unfortunate or 'alien' and the signs were said to *turn away* from each other, indicating an almost malevolent lack of sympathy. In classical

literature the term *ablepton* meaning 'not seen' or 'blind' is frequently encountered, as is *asyndeton* meaning 'unconnected', *aversum* 'turned away from', and *alienum* 'unfamiliar'.[3]

Naturally, the trine is the most favourable aspect because harmony and balance are inherent in its shape.[4] It has the ability to facilitate agreement between the planets, and enables them to respond to each other as sympathetically as their natures allow. Whether the result is beneficial or not depends entirely upon the planets involve and what they represent – the destructive energies of a debilitated Mars can produce a catastrophic influence!

The square, known as the *quartile* or *quadrate,* was not an altogether undesirable aspect. While unable to offer the agreement of the trine, the fact that the signs have a strong 'sight' of each other means there is some familiarity between them. Manilius explains that the trigon's power is greater than the quadrate's, but speaks favourably of them both when he says:

> *And whatever points joined in a series of four the angle favours, and whatever point the straight line marks in its threefold track ...upon these has nature bestowed federation and common law, mutual goodwill and rights of friendship with each other.*[5]

The square was only taken as unquestionably damaging when a malefic or unfortunate planet was involved, though many texts speak of the need for reception or some other form of familiarity for there to be a positive influence.

Illustrations of the so-called 'bad' aspects being interpreted positively are found throughout the 1st century text of Dorotheus of Sidon. He says, for example, that it is better to have the Lord of the triplicity of the Moon in a *good place with the Moon or in opposition to it or quartile or trine* than it is to have the *Lord of the triplicity* <u>*not aspecting*</u> *the ascendant or the Moon*. The latter is a *bad indication for that native*.[6]

Dorotheus reminds us that the nature of the aspectual relationship depends upon a number of factors, principally the strength and nature of the planets involved. A trine from Jupiter to Venus might indicate fame, he warns, but if Venus is afflicted it will be a notorious infamy caused through disgraceful relationships. Similarly, a square aspect will not harm if both planets are well placed, dignified and receive each other amicably.

Dorotheus refers to the trine as an aspect of *much love* and to the quartile as one of a *medium amount of love*. No such friendship is indicated by the opposition; this aspect is based upon the divisive symbolism of the number two, is the epitome of separation and enmity. Only occasionally is it taken to represent agreement – usually between conflicting parties who strike up an unstable alliance. Manilius acknowledged a fundamental similarity between opposing signs because of their common gender, but added that more obvious differences predominate:

> *....sign facing sign they shine opposed, yet because of their nature they are oft borne in alliance and a mutual sympathy springs up between them, linked as they are by the tie of sex:....but over this tie the seasons prevail: Cancer resists Capricorn, though females both, since summer conflicts with winter....wonder not at the signs so situate doing battle.*[7]

Not only is it unfriendly, the opposition is a very strong and forceful aspect because the planets have a clear and direct view of each other.

The sextile, which has an obtuse angle, has a relatively weak line of vision and its importance was frequently understated by classical authors.[8] Where it was used, its derivation from number three determined its interpretation. It was said to be *like the trine but weaker*.[9]

Application & Development of Orbs

Assuming planets are in direct motion aspects are cast by swifter planets and received by slower ones. It is important to note whether an aspect is applying or separating because this adds vital descriptive value to the chart. Generally, separating aspects represent the early life, older people and past events; applying aspects indicate younger persons (those born after the native), the conditions of later life and future events.

The classical attitude towards aspects and orbs was much more relaxed than our own. The simple rule was that where two signs are in aspect, any planets within those signs are in aspect too, regardless of the specific degrees. Sometimes, sign-cusps were used as limits to the aspect's influence, as we are told in the 12th century text of Ibn Ezra, who claimed that the ancients would not consider a conjunction between two planets, even though they were in orb, unless both were also in the same sign. However, although Ezra wrote about the rule he disagreed with it himself, saying:

> *If the two planets should be in two signs and each one of them should be in the force of the other's body, they must not be said to be in conjunction, because they are in different signs. That is the opinion of the ancient scientists, but I, Abraham, the compiler of this book, disagree with them.*[10]

In practice most astrologers did allow an aspect which crossed the boundaries of the signs where it was close to exactness by degree. Also, many texts remind the student that reckoning aspects by sign alone will not necessarily maintain the philosophy of the shapes, and that it is more correct to consider the actual degrees. A planet at 28 ° Leo, for example, trines a planet at 2° Sagittarius according to the relationship of the signs, but is close to an exact square when the planetary positions are measured from degree to degree. The latter is known as a *partile* aspect, because it considers the 'parts' (or degrees) rather than the signs. Aspects judged according to the relationship of the signs are called *platick,* from a term which meant 'plate' or 'broad area'.[11]

In most of the charts taken from the files of Vettius Valens, standard procedure was apparently to calculate aspects according to the signs, for he rarely bothered to even list planetary positions by degree. Yet he was aware of the need to consider the degrees and in one example refers to a damaging aspect occurring between Taurus and Virgo *'because it is in its square, reckoned by degrees'*.[12]

Orbs originated from a need to determine a limit to 'perfection' – the period of the aspect's strongest force. Usually this was interpreted as the degree of exactness, but opinion varied and the 2nd century text of Antiochus[13] mentions 'contact' or 'application in the proper sense' as occurring within 3°.[14] The 11th century text of Arabic astrologer al-Biruni also contains a list of planetary orbs which are reported to be copied from the 3rd century work of Porphyrius.[15] Unfortunately we presently have no clear and unambiguous examples of the use of orbs in classical astrology and can only make a reasoned guess at their development, based on information given in later texts.

The Latin orbis literally means 'circle' or 'sphere', defining a planetary orb as that area of heaven which immediately surrounds it – vast and full orbed, and then all of a sudden not there at all – was how Pliny spoke of the Moon.[16] Some authors referred to a planet's orb as *the force of its body*, perceiving it as a kind of highly charged aura, invisible to the eye, but steeped in the influence of the planet.

Planet	Limit of obscurity by the Sun as defined by Firmicus: II.ix	Al-Biruni's orbs (v.436)	Elsewhere [see note]
Sun	not listed	15°	17°
Moon	not listed	12°	12½°
Mercury	18°	7°	7°
Venus	8°	7°	8°
Mars	8°	8°	7½°
Jupiter	12°	9°	12°
Saturn	15°	9°	10°

Note: - One of the most popular lists of orbs, used by the likes of William Lilly and Ibn Ezra. Lilly was never authoritative on the matter of orbs and admitted of the two lists: 'I sometimes use the one and sometimes the other as my memory serves me best'. In practice, he tended to favour the list of Al-Biruni.

We can be fairly confident that the orbs of the Sun and Moon derive from the distance at which obscuration occurs during heliacal phenomena. The Sun's traditional orb of 15° - 17° is just about the distance at which planets disappear from view when they enter into conjunction with the Sun. The Moon's orb of around 12° is also that which separates the luminaries when the new crescent Moon reappears after conjunction. It becomes visible at a lesser distance than the planets because it is a more luminous body.[17] Such figures can only be approximate because they are affected by the brilliancy of the planet and prevailing weather conditions. It is possible that all the planetary orbs originate from an early attempt to record heliacal obscurity. The table above, for example, shows the figures that Firmicus used to determine by how many degrees planets become morning stars, which rise before the Sun, or evening

stars which rise after the Sun. With the exception of the figure given for Mercury, they bear a close resemblance to the list of traditional orbs.[18] Another argument, however, is that the outer limits were not based upon any kind of visual arc at all, but upon the strength and superiority of the planets. Hence the outer planets Mars, Jupiter and Saturn have a more prominent influence, and were accordingly given larger orbs than the inferiors Mercury and Venus.

By the time that Al-Biruni wrote his *Elements in the Art of Astrology*, in the 11th century, opinion was quite sharply divided on the correct 'limits of completion'. According to his commentary some astrologers used a 12° allowance either side of all aspects (based on the fact that this is the orb of the Moon); others used a 15° allowance (the orb of the Sun): and some used the mean planetary orb of whichever two planets were in aspect. Yet others took their lead from Ptolemy, who in the *Tetrabiblos* had specified a 5° orb for the ascendant making a case that this should be applied to perfecting aspects as well. Others still preferred an allowance of 6° based upon the fact that, as a fifth of a sign, this is the average length of the planetary terms.[19]

In view of the confusion, it's hardly surprising that the question of orbs was often avoided altogether. One of the earliest texts to address the matter with any kind of detail is that of the French astrologer Claude Dariot (1533-1594). His work offered a clear explanation of how orbs should be determined, and his method became the standard for European Renaissance astrologers.

Moiety of the Orb

As an introduction to the matter of orbs, Dariot first mentions briefly that 'application' *may* be said to begin 6° from perfection. But he then outlines his preferred system, in which the aspect is decided by the mean orb of the two planets in question. He refers to the orbs as the *circles, radiations* or *beams* of the planets 'though which they may be joined by either corporal conjunction or aspect'. He adheres to the planetary limits specified by al-Biruni, adding that these are really the diameters of the orbs.[20] Mercury, for example, has a total orb of 14°, extending 7° either side, while the Moon has a 24° orb extending 12° either side. It is only as Mercury and the Moon 'touch' the middle half of their orbs that completion (or application) truly begins. This middle region is called the 'moiety' of the orb, *moitie* being a 15th century French word derived from the Latin *medietas*, meaning middle. Using al-Biruni's figures, the moiety for each orb is shown in the following table:

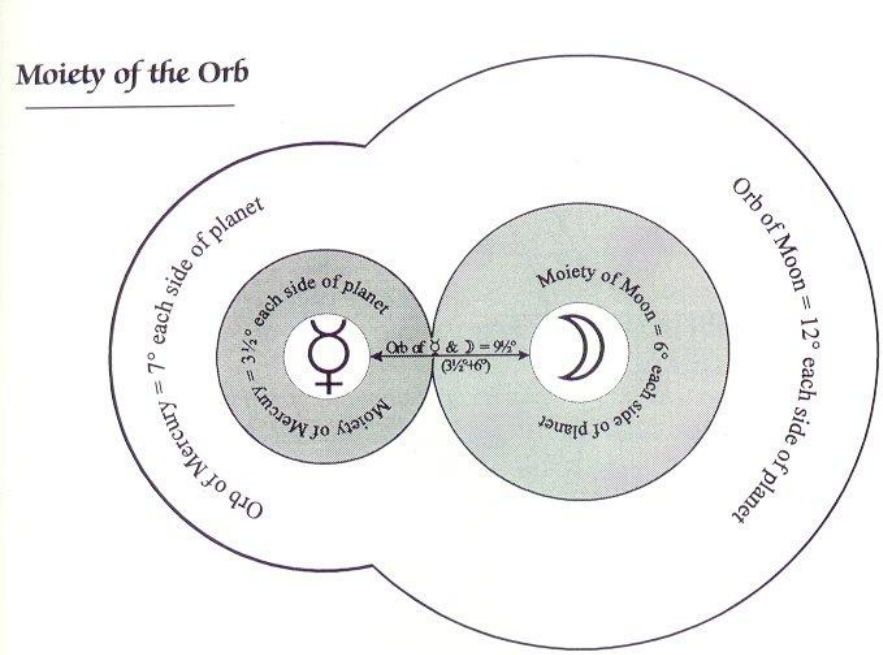
DISTANCE AT WHICH PLANETS ARE IN ORB OF EACH OTHER
Using Dariot's figures & a standard 5° orb for outer planets **

▪	Sun	Moon	Mercury	Venus	Mars	Jupiter	Saturn	Uranus	Neptune	Pluto
Sun	▪	13½°	11°	11°	11½°	12°	12°	10°	10°	10°
Moon	13½°	▪	9½°	9½°	10°	10½°	10½°	8½°	8½°	8½°
Mercury	11°	9½°	▪	7°	7½°	8°	8°	6°	6°	6°
Venus	11°	9½°	7°	▪	7½°	8°	8°	6°	6°	6°
Mars	11½°	10°	7½°	7½°	▪	8½°	8½°	6½°	6½°	6½°
Jupiter	12°	10½°	8°	8°	8½°	▪	9°	7°	7°	7°
Saturn	12°	10½°	8°	8°	8½°	9°	▪	7°	7°	7°
Uranus	10°	8½°	6°	6°	6½°	7°	7°	▪	5°	5°
Neptune	10°	8½°	6°	6°	6½°	7°	7°	5°	▪	5°
Pluto	10°	8½°	6°	6°	6½°	7°	7°	5°	5°	▪

** 5° orb may also be applied to angles and all other non-luminous points.

Hence, an aspect involving Mercury and Venus begins its completion (or is 'in orb') when the two planets are 7° apart, the total of their respective moieties: 3½° + 3½°. A much larger allowance of 13½° is accepted for the Sun and Moon (7½° + 6½°), recognising the greater importance of the luminary bodies. Separation begins to occur as soon as the planets have passed exactness, but the influence of the aspect is not fully diminished until they have gone beyond the moiety of their orbs.

Only within the last century have orbs come to be determined by the nature of the aspect rather than the planets involved, a simplifying process which fails to accept that some planets have a stronger influence than others. Yet as late as the mid-1940s, when Sepharial wrote his *New Dictionary of Astrology*, popular understanding of orbs was still very much in line with the principles of moiety employed by the likes of Dariot and Lilly.[21]



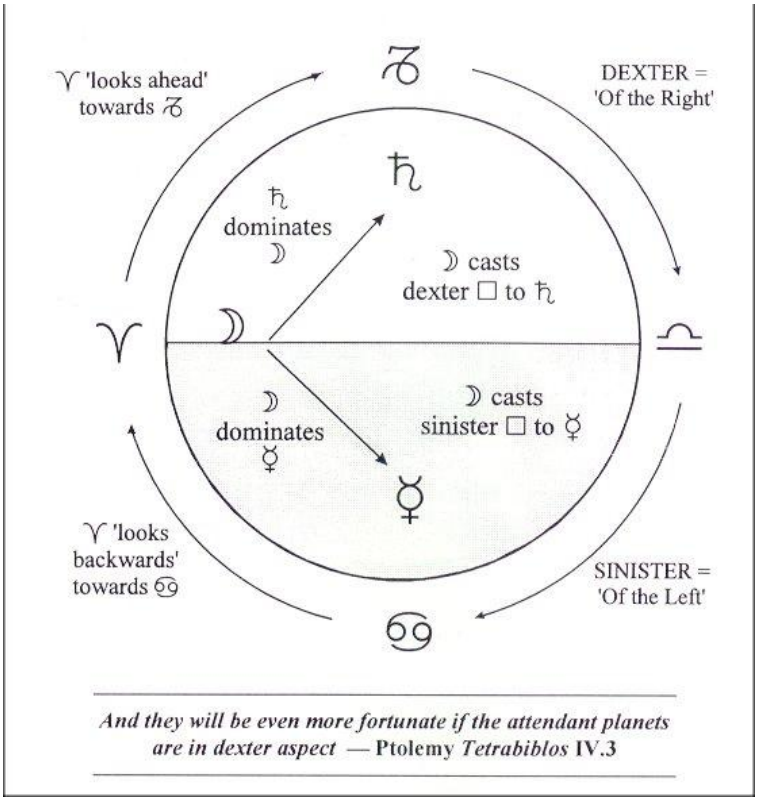
Modern use of orbs attributes them to the aspects but traditionally they belonged to the planets.

Fixed stars were given orbs between 1° and 7½ ° depending on brilliance and their position in the chart.

Sinister & Dexter

Trines, squares and sextiles are sometimes called two-sided aspects in traditional works because they can be cast to the left or right of any planet.[22] If a planet is placed in Aries, its square to a planet in Capricorn is called a **dexter** aspect (dexter meaning *of the right*) and its square to planet in Cancer is called **sinister** (*of the left*). The interpretation of these terms is again linked to Pythagorean philosophy and rests upon the way that the signs view each other. Their sight is said to follow the daily movement of heaven so that dexter describes a natural, forward view, while sinister describes a strained, backward view.

The diagram demonstrates how dexter and sinister relate to planetary motion. Every day the planets revolve around the Earth from east to west. They appear at the eastern horizon, culminate at the midheaven and disappear from view at the western horizon. The diurnal motion which carries the planets clockwise across the heavens was paramount in traditional astrology, though in modern texts it is virtually ignored.[23] As we have lost much of the geocentric understanding which lies at the basis of our symbolism, emphasis has been thrown instead upon the anti-clockwise movement of the planets through the signs. This describes the astronomical movement of the planets through the zodiac, but loses the perspective of the heavens as they appear from the Earth, and ignores the essential symbolism attached to the polarity of day and night.



And they will be even more fortunate if the attendant planets are in dexter aspect — Ptolemy *Tetrabiblos* IV.3

Classical astrologers, however, considered diurnal movement central to their art and called it the natural motion of heaven. Manilius explained that as a sign rises, its gaze is directed towards the signs that rose before it, not at those which rise after it. Aries *looks forward* towards Aquarius by sextile, Capricorn by square and Sagittarius by trine:

> *Capricorn views Libra, whilst the Ram sees Capricorn ahead and is in turn beheld at an equal distance by the Crab; and the Crab is perceived by Libra's leftward stars as it follows up:* ***for preceding signs are reckoned as right signs****.*[24]

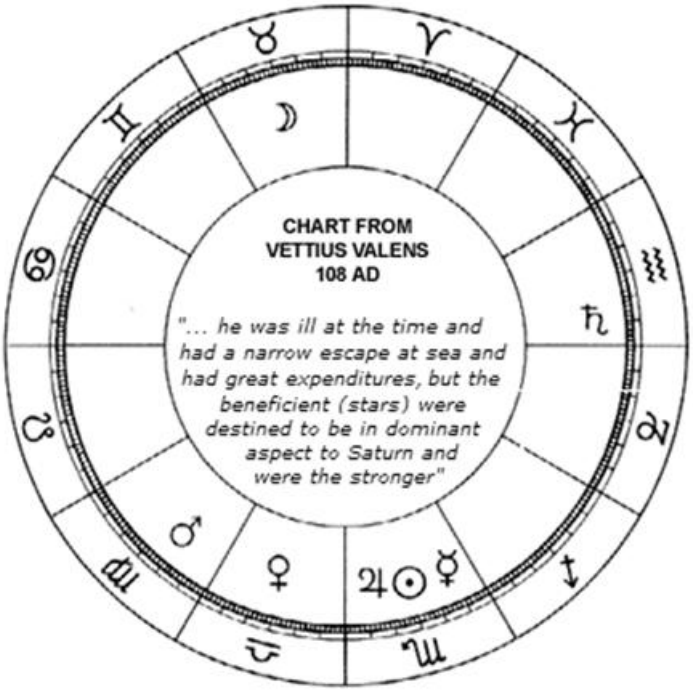
A dexter aspect is therefore more direct. It has a stronger influence than a sinister one and is more likely to produce an uncomplicated, direct effect. A

sinister aspect, because it is issued against the natural movement of heaven and has to 'look backwards', is weaker and somewhat debilitated. The terms generally convey something of the ancient and widespread belief that the direction 'right' is manifest, strong and linked to diurnal qualities, while 'left' is hidden, passive and nocturnal. Hence the word sinister, originally used to depict something belonging to the left, has come to mean something that is dark, hidden or in an unnatural state.

The Dominating Planet

Classical works also tell us that the planet on the right of an aspect (i.e., that which is more forward in diurnal movement) **dominates, overcomes** or **overpowers** the one to the left. (In the diagram to the right the Moon in Aries dominates Mercury in Cancer, while Saturn in Capricorn dominates the Moon.) It is much better to have a benefic dominating a malefic – thereby reducing its power to destroy - than it is to have a malefic overpowering a benefic. For example, Dorotheus tells us that if Jupiter dominates Mars by Square, the native will be *noble, steadfast, compassionate*. But if Mars dominates Jupiter they will be *feeble-minded, tiresome, fatigued, slanderous*.[25]

Classical astrologers like Vettius Valens made much use of the dominating planet. In the chart reproduced below he describes how Saturn in Aquarius brought the native a perilous year in which he became ill, had a narrow escape at sea, and a very expensive lawsuit (which, eventually, he won). Valens explained that although Saturn was angular in the 7th, it was dominated by Venus in Libra (by trine) and Jupiter in Scorpio (by Square). So, because the benefics overpowered Saturn and were the stronger, the man's misfortune was alleviated and Saturn was inhibited from causing serious damage.[26]



In line with this, the 9th, 10th and 11th house from any planet was thought to have the strongest influence over it – especially the 10th house, which dominated the planet in the same way that the Midheaven dominates the Ascendant. Ptolemy refers to this where he says that in the matter of death the only houses that have any power of dominion (besides the ascendant and the descendant) are the 9th, 10th and 11th house from the ascendant, which is the point of life.[27]

References:

[1] Ptolemy, in his Tetrabiblos, says on this: (1.24 – Leob p. 115) '…a relation is taken to exist whether it happens by bodily conjunction or through one of the traditional aspects, except that with respect to the bodily applications and separations of the heavenly bodies it is of use also to observe their latitudes, in order that only those passages may be accepted which are found to be on the same side of the ecliptic. In the case of applications and separations by aspect, however, such a practise is superfluous, because all rays fall and similarly converge from every direction upon the same point, that is, the centre of the Earth.'

[2] Manilius, Astronomica, 2.385-395

[3] See Firmicus II.XXII and the translator's 38th note (Ascella Reprints p.303). Also Greek Horoscopes by Neugebauer & Van-Hoesen, p.13.

[4] See Traditional Astrologer, issue 7: 'An Introduction to Pythagorean Numerology' and issue 6: 'Classical Use of Triplicities'.

[5] Astronomica 2.340; (Leob p.109)

[6] Dorotheus, Carmen Astrologicum, Bk I. ch.25; (Ascella Reprints p.189).

[7] Astronomica, 2.410; (Leob p.115).

[8] Firmicus, Translator's 39th note (Ascella Reprints p.303).

[9] Dorotheus, II.17; (p.221).

[10] Ibn Ezra, The Beginning of Wisdom Ch. 7; Ascella Reprints, p.209

[11] In Renaisance astrology the term *partile* generally referred to aspects which were exact or near perfection, whereas *platick* referred to those which were 'loose', or in a wider orb.

[12] Neugebauer & Van-Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes,* p.82. In their footnote the translators state that they cannot verify what is meant by this comment, revealing its rarity in Valens' work.

[13] *The Thesaurus,* translated by Robert Schmidt; edited by Robert Hand; published by the Golden Hind Press (1993) as part of the Project Hindsight undertaking to translate ancient astrological works.

[14] William Lilly mentions this 3° orb being significant in his Merlini Anglici, 1677, saying: *A Partile Aspect comes to pass within the difference of three degrees* – though elsewhere he defines a partile aspect as exact to within 1°.

[15] Al-Biruni, *The Book of Instruction in the Elements of the Art of Astrology,* translated by R. Ramsay Wright (Ascella); Notes p.255.

[16] Natural History II. 42; (Loeb p.195).

[17] Traditional sources claim that the planets go 'Under the Beams of the Sun' at either 15° or 17°. Lilly mentioned both limits, claiming on p.113 of *Christian Astrology* that a planet goes under the Sun's Beams at 17° from the Sun, but later contradicting himself in an editorial note td Henry Coley's translation of Guido Bonatus's *Anima Astrologiae*. He claims there that a planet is more correctly termed 'Under the Sun's Beams' when it is less than 12° from the Sun; and said to be 'going Under the Sun's Beams' when the distance is between 12° - 15°. (Consideration 53, p.25.)

[18] Firmicus, BkII IX. For a detailed illustration of how application and separation is connected to the individual relationship between a planet and the Sun see Ezra's The Beginning of Wisdom, Ch.7.

[19] For al-Biruni on orbs see ch.s 436-437, 446 &490.

[20] Dariot, *Ad Astorum Facilis Introductio*, (1593) Chapter 7. This text was serialised over issues 5, 6 & 7 of *The Traditional Astrologer*.

[21] Page 80. (Ascella Reprints).

[22] Al-Biruni adds that when a planet is in the Midheaven and has two sextile or quartile aspects which both fall above the earth, it is said to have two right hands. If they fall below the earth it has two left hands. The indications of the former are success and victory, Ch. 503.

[23] Ptolemy, in speaking of the two systems of motion, referred to the daily progress of a star from east to west as 'first primary motion' (*Almagest* I.8). The poet Chaucer summed up its importance when he wrote:

First cause of motion, cruel firmament,
Driving the stars with thy diurnal sway
And hurling all from east to occident,
That naturally would take another way.

[24] *Astronomica*, 2.290-295; (Loeb p.105).

[25] Bk. II.15.14 (p.215).

[26] O. Neugebauer and H.B Van-Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes* p.104, No.L108, XI.

[27] *Tetrabiblos*, III.10.

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