

A Brief Overview of the History of Western Astrology

By Hamish Saunders

If you asked a random selection of people to define what astrology is the most likely response would be something like "It's the star sign column in the paper", probably followed by " I do have to confess that I occasionally read mine but I don't take it seriously".

Sun sign astrology, which is what our 'random selection' is referring to here, is a very recent phenomenon in the world, especially in the world of astrology. The first sun sign column appeared in England in 1930 after the birth of Princess Margaret. R.H. Naylor wrote an astrological profile of the newborn princess in the London Daily Express.¹ So enthusiastic was the response to this from the public that the newspaper employed Naylor as their full-time astrological columnist.

The astrology that interests us in this article is thousands of years old and has played a central role in shaping the religion, philosophy, politics, science, art and day-to-day affairs of most world civilisations.

The word 'astrology' (from the Greek *astron* - star, and *logos* - study) is literally the study of the stars and the age-old partner of astronomy. In fact, before the 17th century the two words 'astrology' and 'astronomy' were interchangeable, and practitioners of either were usually skilled in both disciplines. Astronomy is perhaps considered more scientific while astrology more philosophical.

The origins of western astrology are not clear but astrologers generally acknowledge four stages in its development: Pre-literate astrology, which pre-dates recorded history; ancient astrology, from about 2000 BC to around 200 AD; traditional astrology, from about the 2nd century AD to the 17th century; and modern astrology, from the 1700's to the present day.²

Pre-historic Beginnings

Pre-literate astrology consisted mainly of astronomical observation for pragmatic reasons. Earliest man was nomadic. There is evidence that our ancestors were aware of celestial movements as far back as 15,000 years BC through recordings of lunar phases on animal bones. It was imperative that early humans were able to regulate their lives in order to prepare for floods and droughts, as well as heat and cold. As nomadic migrations gave way to more stable agrarian civilisations at around 9,000 BC, it became important to know the seasons so that crops could be planted, harvested and stored. Observation and worship of the Sun and Moon was central to the day-to-day life of early man. The cycles of the Sun and Moon were used to measure time and to time festivals and procreation. The study of these two celestial bodies led to the emergence of myths and interpretations, which would in time be extended to the planets and constellations.

By 4000 BC to 2000 BC it had become evident from the construction of Megalithic monuments, such as Stonehenge in Northern Europe, that the builders of these structures had

acquired a level of mathematical, astronomical and mythological sophistication. The knowledge they gained was eventually passed on to the emerging civilisations of Mesopotamia and became the basis of western astrology.

Ancient Astrology in Mesopotamia

Mesopotamian civilisation, which comprised of the Sumerians, Babylonians and Chaldeans, started to come into being around 4000 BC in the region now occupied by Iraq. Commonly referred to by historians as "the cradle of civilisation", the cultures that flourished here gave birth to the Judeo-Christian tradition that has lasted into the present day. The first inhabitants of the region were the Sumerians who developed the earliest known form of writing, cuneiform. Cuneiform tablets became the principal method of record keeping throughout the Mesopotamian period and our primary source of information about ancient astrology. The Sumerians were interested in divination and astronomy, and their mathematics is said to have been as sophisticated as the mathematics of 17th century Europe **3**. It is thought that the merging of these three sciences took place around about 2000 BC and laid the foundation of a structured astrological system. The earliest known astrology texts we have are the *Enuma Anu Enlil*, a series of some 7000 omens on 70 tablets, and the *Venus Tablet of Amisaduqa*. The *Enuma Anu Enlil* dates from the 8th century BC and contains older material such as the Venus Tablet, which is thought to have been written during the reign of the Babylonian king, Amisaduqa, c 1600 BC.

In its earliest stages, Mesopotamian astrology was a simple examination of the heavens for omens that might affect the kingdom. For example, from a deciphered cuneiform text:

*"When Moon and Sun are in opposition on the 14th lunar day, the king of the realm will be possessed of an extensive ear".**4***

The planets were seen as Gods and played a significant role in prophecy and divination. Astrology, however, was only one of the methods of divination employed by the ancients. They saw meaning in everything around them. For example, if a man stepped out of his house in the morning and saw a snake on the ground in his garden it was considered an omen for good or bad. And, yes, they examined the livers and entrails of animals but, contrary to popular misconception, such activities were neither directly involved in the development of astrology nor connected with it. Observation of the movements of the heavens, the colours and positions of the planets and the effects these had on human life were the basis of astrology, and quite separate to these other divinatory techniques.

By about 750 BC the Mesopotamians were master mathematicians and astronomers. They had mapped the entire sky, developed an 18 sign zodiac and were able to accurately calculate the future positions of the planets and eclipses. They had divided the ecliptic into 360° and attributed 60 minutes to each degree and 60 seconds to every minute of a degree.

The next major development in astrology was the emergence of the 12 sign zodiac after 600 BC. Still, however, there was no personal horoscopy, but great attention was made by then to the 12-year cycle of Jupiter through the signs. The first known personal horoscope is dated by A. Sachs to April 29, 410 BC. This horoscope was fairly rudimentary, comprising the planets into the constellations. The first use of planetary ephemerides is dated from 308 BC, and in 4 BC the Ascendant (rising sign) and the houses were first used.

Astrology in Egypt

A common misapprehension is that astrology originated in ancient Egypt. The Egyptians were certainly involved in divination and astronomy, however, there is no evidence to support a use of astrology. It was not until Alexander the Great invaded Egypt in 332 BC that astrology became part of Egyptian culture. Alexander is attributed with the spread of astrology to Egypt and India. He is known to have consulted astrologers and to have them counted among his entourage during his campaigns. Alexander is responsible for the cross-fertilisation of Greek, Persian, Mesopotamian and Indian astrologies. The city of Alexandria founded by him became the ancient world's centre of learning and housed, among many things, the astrological knowledge of antiquity. The most famous evidence of any astrology in Egypt are the zodiacs at Dendera. However, they are not thought to be all that ancient. It is estimated they were built around 30 BC.⁵

Astrology in Classical Greece

The earliest mention of astronomy in Greece is by Hesiod in his poem *Works and Days* c 750 BC. He suggests, with the aid of astronomical references, that there are propitious times to start certain tasks.⁶

The early Greek philosophers were intrigued by the astrology of the Mesopotamians. They were primarily astronomers without knowledge of astrology. Once they adopted it, however, they ran with it. The Greeks contributed depth, symmetry and rationalisation to it. Pythagoras introduced the idea that the human being was a microcosm, a miniature universe reflecting the macrocosm, the universe as a whole. Plato supported this idea and mentions astrology in his *Timaeus*. The Greeks also introduced the theories of the four elements: Fire, Earth, Air and Water; and the four humours, which are central to the science of astro-medicine and the medical methodology of Hippocrates. It is said that Hippocrates stated "A physician who has no knowledge of astrology has no right to call himself a physician". Hipparchus discovered the precession of the equinoxes in the 2nd century BC, and laid the foundation for the development of the tropical zodiac, the most commonly used zodiac in the western world. These advances in mathematics and astronomy enabled the calculation of accurate birth charts for individuals.

The most famous astrologer of antiquity is Claudius Ptolemy c 100 AD. A Greek, Ptolemy lived in Alexandria during the Roman occupation of the city. He is remembered in history for his two great works on astronomy and astrology, the *Almagest* and the *Tetrabiblos* respectively. Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* is the only remaining summation we have of the astrology of the ancients. The rest did not survive the destruction of the Alexandrian library. The *Tetrabiblos* became the standard astrological text of the Arabs and the European astrologers until the 17th century, and his earth-centered Ptolemaic universe the astronomical model until Copernicus established that the Sun is at the centre of the solar system.

Astrology during the Roman Empire

Popular astrology could be said to have had its beginnings in ancient Rome. Legend has it that astrology was brought to the Romans in the 2nd century BC by the slave Antiochus. The early Roman astrologers were commonly referred to as Chaldeans, as it was the Chaldeans coming into the Empire that promoted and practised the art. Astrology immediately appealed to the general public and the priests and intellectuals alike. The masses were attracted to the fortune-telling aspect, while the intelligentsia was impressed with its philosophical depth and use of planetary cycles. Only the authorities took exception to it, due to its ability to sway public opinion, and on several occasions had astrologers expelled from Rome.

Astrology during the Roman Empire was used by and in some cases practised by a succession of emperors. Caesar Augustus had his Moon sign, Capricorn, minted onto coins. Tiberius was an accomplished astrologer, as were Hadrian and Domitian later. Caligula and Nero debased astrology by using it as a means to ascertain the character of their potential rivals, whose subsequent demise was a *fait accompli* if their horoscopes revealed that they could be a threat to the emperor. The major astrological figure of the Roman era was Julius Firmicus Maternus, an astrologer, lawyer and Christian. Firmicus lived in the 4th century AD and is notable for spanning the divide between Christian and pagan thought. His masterwork, the *Mathesis*, is a practical textbook of astrology. The decline of the Roman Empire after the sacking of Rome by the Goths in 410 AD began the decline of European scholarship and European astrology until its re-introduction in the Middle Ages.

Astrology in the Arab World

Learning and astrology were virtually in a state of suspension during the Dark Ages in Europe. The centre of learning shifted to the Islamic states of the Middle East, and was fostered during the Arabic expansionism of the 7th and 8th centuries. The Arabian Empire ranged from the Middle East to China, India, France, Spain and North Africa. The Arabs were able to appreciate the culture and knowledge of the civilisations they had conquered and they were seized by a desire to understand and develop the mathematics, astronomy and astrology of the Greeks. The Arabs became the preservers of western astrology for several hundred years until its re-introduction into Medieval Europe. They improved upon the astronomy of Ptolemy, built observatories and developed the astrolabe, a device for observing the positions of the planets and stars. They saw astrology as part of a larger whole, not just a means of prediction, but also as a key to understanding life in general. The planets were seen as channels of spiritual power.

Medieval and Renaissance Astrology

Recent opinion holds that the high point of the astrological tradition was reached in Medieval and Renaissance Europe from the 11th to the 17th centuries. By this period in our history astrology had become a body of knowledge with a richness and depth gained from over 3000 years of study by the greatest civilisations on Earth. To quote Robert Zoller from his correspondence course in Medieval Astrology: *“It is not merely a system of fortune telling, nor yet a science devoid of spiritual import. It is divination in the ancient and true sense – the art of communicating with and eventually coming to know the Divine.”*

The Medieval and Renaissance astrologers were philosophers, mathematicians, astronomers and alchemists. Astrology was taught in the universities and reflected in the art, literature and architecture of the period. Both Chaucer and Shakespeare are laden with astrological references. Chaucer was known to be an astrologer and Shakespeare was sympathetic to it.

The resurgence of astrology in Europe can be traced to an English monk by the name of Alcuin (born 735 AD).⁷ Alcuin received the patronage of Charlemagne who brought him to France and had him set up the first great Medieval school at the Abbey of Saint Martin near Tours. Among the subjects he taught was astrology and, under his tutelage, Charlemagne himself became a competent astrologer.

With this renewed intellectual activity in Europe came the demand for astrological texts. During the 10th to 12th centuries knowledge-thirsty scholars looked to Arabic works on astrology and their versions of the Greek classics. In 1138 the first Latin translation of the *Tetrabiblos* was made and the revival of European astrology was established.

Roger Bacon (1214? - 1294), one of the greatest thinkers of all time, was a skilled astrologer whose encyclopaedic knowledge embraced philosophy, science, mathematics, physics and geometry was convinced the planets influenced human behaviour. The famous theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274) acknowledged the influence of the planets on human behaviour but opposed the deterministic interpretation of astrology citing that it was in opposition to the Christian doctrine of free will. One of the most important figures of 13th century astrology was Guido Bonatti, professor of astrology at the University of Bologna. Bonatti's *Liber Astronomiae* is one of the most important astrological texts of all time. He made his living as an astrological military adviser to Count Guido de Montefeltro.

In the 15th century Pico della Mirandola launched an attack against astrology deeming it unscientific. By today's scientific standards his criticisms were amusing; however it was the first time in hundreds of years that astrology needed to defend itself.

The 15th to 17th centuries were the golden years of European astrology. Hardly a single monarch or aristocrat was without a personal astrologer, and astrology even enjoyed the support of the Papacy in most cases. Among the Popes who consulted astrologers were Julius II (1503 - 1513), Leo X (1513 - 1521) and Paul III (1534 - 1549).⁸ Queen Catherine de Medici was patron to the most famous astrologer of all time, Michel Nostradamus. Elizabeth I in England employed John Dee. A colourful personality, for his life in and outside of astrology, Dee has the distinction of successfully electing the most fortuitous time for Elizabeth's coronation. He acted as a spy for her and code-named himself 007, four hundred years before James Bond, and coined the term 'the British Empire'.⁹ Nicholas Culpeper the herbalist wrote a text on medical astrology, and William Lilly (1602 - 1681), the last of the great European astrologers, predicted the Great Fire of London fourteen years before the event and drew up war charts for the Royalists and the Parliamentarians. In his heyday, Lilly was seeing 2000 clients a year. Famous scientists of this period who were also astrologers were Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler and Galileo.

The Decline of Astrology in the West

No one thing has been attributed to the decline of western astrology from the end of the 17th century to its resurgence at the turn of the 20th century. To some it was the rise of orthodox science, which is ironic considering many of those who pioneered the scientific revolution were astrologers themselves. Most ironic, given the state of affairs existing between astrology and science today, is that the astronomer/astrologer, John Flamsteed (1649 - 1719), the first Astronomer Royal, used astrology to elect the best time to found the Royal Observatory at Greenwich – the sacred heart of modern astronomy.

However, there can be no denying the seeds of the 17th century's eventual disaffection with astrology had already been sown in the earlier part of the century. Astrologers were increasingly at theological odds with the Catholic Church. Their cause would probably not have been assisted by a prediction against the life of Pope Urban VIII in 1631 by a somewhat over-eager astrologer. ¹⁰ This understandably earned the Pope's displeasure and the re-assertion by him of a 16th century Papal Bull against the practice of judicial astrology. No astrologer has ever been persecuted for practising astrology; however the disfavour of the Church at this time could have contributed to the political climate change that was to come.

What is most likely is that intellectual focus shifted towards a more mechanistic Newtonian view of the universe and the minds that had previously applied themselves to Neo-Platonic and Ptolemaic cosmologies rejected these models. While these considerations may go some way to

determine astrology's fall from favour, they are not sufficient reasons for its decline. It could be that the world was becoming more specialised and expansive at the same time with the discoveries of new colonies, developing technologies and the eventual arrival of the Industrial Revolution and its impact on world economies and capitalism generally. Court astrologers found themselves being replaced by more specialised advisers.

Faced with the rapid pace of change, astrology as a subject worthy of serious study began to fall to the wayside. It was finally removed from the universities in 1776 resulting in a decline of intellectual rigour amongst its practitioners through the 18th and 19th centuries. However, certain names do stand out from the crowd in Victorian England, e.g. Richard Cross Smith and Commander Richard James Morrison, respectively known by the pseudonyms, *Raphael* and *Zadkiel*. And W.J. Simmonite and Walter Old, also known as *Sepharial*.¹¹ That these astrologers had to hide behind 'stage names' suggests the respect astrology had previously held had diminished. Yet it persisted and is now experiencing a renaissance in the 20th century with the general public and scholars alike.

Astrology in the 20th Century.

Astrology is now more popular than it has ever been. In part due to the worldwide proliferation of Sunsign columns that keep it in the public's awareness, but also because some leading academics are realising it might not be so ridiculous after all. However, to be fair, the majority of scientists and academics are not convinced of its usefulness in human and world affairs.

20th century astrology owes its revival to William Frederick Allen, commonly known as Alan Leo (1860 - 1917). A Theosophist, Leo ran a successful postal horoscope service, he wrote numerous books and founded the Astrological Lodge of the Theosophical Society in London in 1917. The Astrological Lodge of London was the parent of all the other British astrological societies and is still in existence today. Leo faced prosecution for 'fortune-telling' in 1914 and 1917. The first case was dismissed on a technicality, while the second one cost him a fine of £25. These cases are the only ones that have been tested in British law. At the same time Leo was reviving it in Britain, enthusiasm for astrology was gaining momentum in the United States and on the continent, especially in Germany. By World War II astrology was well established in Germany through the efforts of Alfred Witte and Reinhold Ebertin and their followers. German astrology took a sinister turn during the Third Reich with its popularity amongst the Nazi leadership. However, there is no evidence that Hitler himself took any notice of it though Hess, Himmler and Goebbels were avid astrophiles. Predictions made in the 1920's relating to the rise and fall of the Third Reich and the fate of Hitler proved themselves to be quite accurate through the 30's and 40's.

Since the 1930's an increasing number of astrologers have applied psychological interpretations to their work. Dane Rudhyar led the move towards a more 'person-centred' form of astrology as opposed to a fatalistic, predictive model. Psychological astrologers tend to work more as counsellors than consultants and incorporate the teachings of leading psychological pioneers such as C.G. Jung and Assagioli.

There have also been attempts by scientists to find a possible 'scientific model' for the basis of astrology. To date, the results have not been overly spectacular. However, the French psychologist and statistician, Michel Gauquelin, has shown statistically that a link appears to exist between the planets and the birth charts of high achievers in sport, science, art and politics. And, Dr Percy Seymour, a leading astrophysicist, is convinced that resonance may be the key to a scientific understanding of its effects.

Whether a scientific explanation for astrology is ever found, or necessary, matters not to the vast majority of its practitioners and their clients. Astrology is currently enjoying a revival of public interest. It is used by royalty and presidents of the United States and Russia, global financiers (an estimated \$US1 billion is traded daily on the world markets on the advice of astrologers), famous actors and everyday people. Astrology, now more than ever, is doing what it has always done well - assisting people understand their place in the cosmos, spiritually, intellectually and emotionally. It has earned this right through its thousands of years of development and its ability to survive regardless.

References:

- An Introduction to the History of Astrology. *By Nicholas Campion* Pub. Institute for the Study of Cycles; 1982. *Notes 1,3,5,6,9&10.*
- The Larousse Encyclopedia of Astrology *By Jean-Louis Brau, Allan Edmands & Helen Weaver.*Pub.Librarie Larousse; 1980 *Note #2*
- History of Astrology *By Derek and Julia Parker.* Pub. Andre Deutsch Limited; 1983 *Note #8*
- The Combination of Stellar Influences *By Reinhold Ebertin.* Pub. American Federation of Astrologers; 1972 *Note #4*
- “A Century of Reform” *By Deborah Houlding.* The Traditional Astrologer. Issue #14, May 1997; Pub. Ascella Publications *Note #10*

Hamish has been a full-time astrologer since 1981. He was the AFI's president from 1988 - 2005. He is a graduate of Robert Zoller's course in Medieval Astrology and is an honorary member of the Regulus Ebertin Study Group in Australia. He is a co-developer of Janus Astrology Software. Visit www.astrology-house.com

© Hamish Saunders 1998 All Rights Reserved.