

## **Hellenistic Astrology**

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I had the privilege of attending the ISAR 2005 Biennial Conference, held from August 17th through the 22nd in Chicago, Illinois. Many, many astrologers attended, choosing lectures from twelve “Dynamic Tracks,” including Financial, Psychological, Research, History, Vedic, Mundane and several others. I suppose it's fitting the conference was held in Chicago, once known as “Slaughterhouse to the World”, as many astrological sacred cows were skewered, particularly in the History track, which covered Hellenistic and Classical astrology. Lecturers in this track included Robert Schmidt (who is currently engaged with Project Hindsight), Robert Hand and Demetra George, as well as several others. The techniques and terminology of the ancient Hellenistic astrologers are foreign to modern astrological thought, yet at the same time quite familiar. This is because modern natal astrology's very beginnings are rooted in Hellenistic astrology.

The astrological Hellenistic (which refers to the Greek empire after Alexander the Great) period began roughly about 200 BCE and lasted until around 500-600 CE, around the time of the fall of the Roman Empire when common knowledge of the Greek language was lost. Contrary to what many astrologers were taught and have assumed, natal astrology did not evolve over many millennia of empirical observations. This is the first of many basic assumptions that I've held about my craft that appears to be incorrect. Rather, natal astrology seems to have appeared quite rapidly over the course of 100 to 150 years, beginning about 200 BCE. It was then refined into a coherent mainstream of astrological practice, with proponents such as Valens and Ptolemy (to some extent). With a center of learning based in Alexandria, Egypt, astrology was further refined until the fall of the Roman Empire interrupted the development of Western civilization. The Arabs subsequently kept astrology alive (after receiving it from the Persians) and then passed it back into Western civilization through Spain during the early Medieval period. Much was lost though, due to translation difficulties, misunderstandings, and religious bias. Hellenistic astrology survived more or less intact in its spread eastward to India, where it apparently became the basis for the astrology we know today as Vedic. Of course, the major difference between Vedic and Hellenistic is that Vedic uses the Fixed, or Sidereal Zodiac, whereas Hellenistic and the Western astrological tradition uses the Tropical Zodiac.

One of the biggest differences between the foundation of our astrological craft and current practice is the subject of Houses, or House Systems. Debate has raged for hundreds of years over which quadrant house system is the correct one - Placidus, Regiomontanus, Campanus, Koch, etc. Further debate has raged between proponents of any one or all of these quadrant systems, and those who prefer equal house systems. I myself have drifted among Campanus, Placidus, and others - and finally settled on the Porphyry system, largely for philosophical reasons. I liked the idea of Equal House - after all, we divide the Tropical Zodiac into 12 equal Signs of 30 degrees each, so the idea of dividing Houses into 30 degrees each has a certain philosophical elegance. However, like many modern astrologers, I preferred to see the Ascendant and Midheaven angles at 90

degrees when looking at a chart, so in the end I settled on Porphyry as the most appealing compromise between quadrant systems and equal house systems. In the last few years I've become aware of the Whole Sign system - where your first house begins at 0° of your rising sign, with your second house beginning at 0° of the next sign following your rising sign, and so on around the wheel. As a result, each house in the chart corresponds to a whole sign. This is what Vedic astrology uses as the basis for their houses. After investigating some of the history of the beginnings of astrology, I felt that the earliest astrologers must have used Whole Signs as the best method available until they could accurately calculate the Ascendant degree - which gave rise to the Equal House system most of us are familiar with. From there it was a logical progression to the Porphyry system, which divides each quadrant between the angles equally.

However, at ISAR 2005 I found my assumption to be untrue. Hellenistic astrologers continued to use Whole Sign houses (or "places," which is a more accurate translation of the ancient texts) - and even after their mathematical calculations allowed them to determine the exact degrees of the angles. The Equal House system, while known to the Hellenistic astrologers, was not used very much, even by Ptolemy, despite what we've always assumed. The Porphyry system (which predates Porphyry by over a hundred years, being first described by Valens, who attributed it to an unknown astrologer named Orion) was used by the Hellenistic school - but only to determine the relative strength of the planets! Where an astrologer looked for the affairs of life was only shown through the Whole Sign system! This practice of using two concurrent house division systems continues today in Vedic astrology, but apparently became lost through misunderstanding and/or reinterpretation in the Western world shortly into the Arabic period of astrology, around 1000 AD. If one accepts the Whole Sign system as the valid basis of looking at Houses/Places, then the House System/Quadrant/Equal debate that has raged for so many years completely evaporates and becomes moot! Plus, it restores the philosophical elegance to Houses that the Zodiac Signs have retained over the years - and perhaps goes a long way towards explaining why quadrant systems work in some instances, but not really well in others. Try looking at your charts in Whole Signs; keep an open mind about how the planets work through the houses - while at the same time using Porphyry to determine relative planet strength.

Signs, houses and planetary rulerships have also come down to us in a somewhat garbled fashion. Modern astrologers think of signs being ruled by planets, i.e. Cancer is ruled by the Moon, Scorpio ruled by Mars, etc. This implies that planets have dominion over signs, while apparently the Hellenistic astrologers thought just the opposite. To them, planets spoke for the signs, acting as an emissary or a representative. Adding in the concept of Places (Houses), a planet in a particular House would look to the planet that spoke for the sign on the cusp of that house for guidance. Using the Whole Sign system then, a planet needs to look to the planet that speaks for the sign that the first planet is in. For example, Mars in Taurus would have to look to Venus for help and/or cooperation in influencing the affairs of the Place (House) that Mars is in. Of course, the quality of help Mars receives depends on the condition of Venus. Above all, though, it is the Sign that colors the affairs of the particular Place that it occupies. For example, with Virgo rising, Virgo obviously colors and conditions the first house affairs of body and appearance,

personality, etc. Mercury is Virgo's steward, so the sign and condition of Mercury in the chart adds further characteristics coloring that particular chart's Ascendant. Finally, any planets found in the First Place would then add more indications, depending on how well they might cooperate with Mercury.

Another area of difference between Hellenistic and Classical/Modern astrology is the subject of aspects. Aspect means "to gaze upon" or "to see," and this is literally how our Founding Fathers interpreted aspects. While we tend to classify aspects as malefic or benefic, or perhaps facilitating versus challenging, the Hellenistic astrologers tended to see all of the Ptolemaic aspects as a workable thing - even the squares and the oppositions. While they certainly understood and delineated the differences between malefic and benefic aspects, to them the worst of all possible aspects was no aspect at all - what we currently understand as the inconjunct (which Robert Hand points out is an oxymoron - he prefers the term disconjunct) and its relative, the quincunx (the term inconjunct for the 150° aspect is an incorrect usage). We understand these two aspects as having no shared basis between signs - signs in inconjunct or quincunx share no elemental or modal or gender similarity. This understanding by the ancients carries over to their view of the Houses/Places in relation to the Ascendant sign - which signified life. As a result, in Hellenistic astrology, the second, sixth, eighth and twelfth houses are unfortunate in nature. Modern astrology is still invested in this viewpoint by noting the sixth concerns illness, the eighth death, and the twelfth imprisonment and/or undoing. It's a bit unclear why the ancients viewed the second as unfortunate - speculation is that the second house concern with material items and/or possessions becomes a trap for the spiritual soul.

As modern astrologers, we're somewhat familiar with the concept of rulerships - i.e. the Moon rules Cancer, etc. As noted above, this isn't exactly accurate, as the planet represents the Sign, not the other way around. Additionally, rulerships cover so much more than what we've grown accustomed to. Other types of rulerships include what we think of as exaltations, detriments, and falls - as well as trigons (triplicities), bounds (a more accurate description than terms) and faces. Those of us familiar with these dignity systems are also probably familiar with the point system, i.e. +5 through -5 as a way of determining relative strength. This point system was unknown in Hellenistic times, and in fact was unnecessary. The point system was apparently invented during the Arabic period, and was an attempt by the Arabs to understand and express rulerships, dignities and debilities. However, its effect was to focus the astrologer's attention simply on those planets with high or low scores. In fact, the Hellenistic dignity system was intended to provide a reference scheme showing the resources to which each planet in a chart can turn to for help and assistance. For instance, Mars at 23° Leo, occupying the seventh Place, or House. For help and assistance in influencing the relationship affairs of the chart, Mars would turn to the Sun, whose domicile (a more exact translation of the ancient Greek) is in Leo. There is no exaltation dignity for Leo. Let's say that the chart is a nocturnal, or night chart, meaning the event or native was born with the Sun below the horizon. Jupiter, as trigon/triplicity ruler of Leo would also be of help to Mars. Jupiter is also the Bounds (or Term) ruler of 23° Leo. And finally, Mars itself is in Face at 23° Leo. So while Mars in the Arabic scoring system would only pick up 1 point for being at 23°

Leo, the Hellenistic astrologers originally intended the dignity/debility system as means of determining which planets would aid this Mars in its endeavors - in this example, the Sun and Jupiter. How much help Mars receives of course depends on the conditions of the Sun and Jupiter in this example chart.

And finally, timing. The Greek astrologers used a wide array of systems called Time Lords - some of which survive to this day in Vedic astrology, known as Dashas. This whole array of prognostication systems is an article in itself, best left for another time and place. Secondary progressions and solar arcs as we know them didn't exist, as they are relatively recent inventions. The Greeks were aware of transits and used them to some extent, but did not consider them overly important.

There is an old game played with a group of people where a simple story is concocted, and then told quietly from person to person in a line, individually. The object is to compare the original story with the ending person's story to see and demonstrate how much changes in the retelling. So has astrology been - especially Western astrology through its many language and tradition translations. Until recently, within roughly the last ten years, just how much has changed from natal astrology's origins during the Greek Hellenistic period was very poorly understood by modern astrologers. Through the efforts of Project Hindsight at translating and understanding this ancient material - and through Kepler College's addition of Hellenistic astrology to its curriculum (thereby schooling a rapidly approaching new generation of astrologers in the history of their craft) - Western astrology has the opportunity, in my opinion, to regain balance by understanding its origins. It's only by knowing how we began and where we've been that we'll properly understand where we're at now. This understanding will allow us to evolve a vital, living astrology with greater confidence as we adapt to humanity's rapidly evolving understanding of the Universe.