Lecture 3
Ancient astrology

Today: More on:
• Babylonian and Greek horoscopes
• Actual astrological practices
• Ptolemy and Augustine
• Scientific astrology
• And Augustine’s influential attack on astrology
Ca. 500 BC (Recap)

- Fundamental shifts in:
  - [1] **Celestial divination** from
  - Omens for king and country (celestial and terrestrial)
  - To: Individual predictions (nativity omens and “horoscopes”)
  - Institutional shift from Palace to Temple within the context of political changes
  - And in [2] **Mathematical astronomy**
  - Ecliptic (sun’s path) / 360° Zodiac
  - Sidereal (constellations) vs. Tropical (zodiacal signs); precession of the equinoxes
  - Based on recorded observations for 1500 years
  - So, mathematical/arithmetical but not geometrical, unlike in Greek astronomy
  - Mathematizing period relationships
  - Fundamental for Greek astronomy
  - Apex: Ptolemy’s *Almagest* (2nd century CE)
Babylonian Horoscopes

• Date range: 410 B.C.-69 B.C. (about 30)
• No temporal overlap with the extant Greek horoscopes, as we will see
• Oldest in 61 BC (a coronation horoscope)
• Just the astronomical data is inscribed on the horoscopes
• That the term horoscope is somewhat of a misnomer
• From nativity omens to horoscopes
• Just data, no interpretations
• Examples (2, 9, 14)
Greek Horoscopes: A Taste

- Properly so-called because they actually have horoscopes, namely, rising signs or ascendants
- Two types:
  - [1] Documentary (mainly from papyri in Egypt)
    - 60 or so from 61 BC – 478 AD
  - [2] Literary, mainly from Vettius Valens’s *Anthologies*, who wrote ca. 150-70 AD; empirical; real horoscopes used to illustrate astrological techniques
- A contemporary of Ptolemy, whose *Tetrabiblos* we will discuss in the second half of class today
- 130 or so before 190 AD
- 20 after AD 380, with the latest in 621 AD, but that was actually constructed in 775 AD; the last real one was for 516 AD
- None for the period in between (i.e. AD 190-380!)
- Also mostly data with few interpretations
- Examples: Documentary: 3 BC, 81 AD, 320, 345, 478
- Literary: L71 BC (Balbillus, Nero’s astrologer), L76, L78, L412 (Proclus), L440, 474-5, 478-9, L621 (last)
Very Basic Bibliography


• ___, *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy, and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004


• And for a good basic introduction to modern astrology:

• *Parker’s Astrology* by Derek and Julia Parker in many editions.
Next:

• Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos* for astrological theory and practice (and very minimally for its scientific foundations)
• Scientific astrology
• Astrology in the Roman Empire, where it first really took hold in the West, in its social and political dimensions
• Saint Augustine’s relationship thereto vis-à-vis fate and divination
• An influential attack on astrology
Claudius Ptolemy, 2nd c. CE
His Range of Mathematical Works

- Astronomy (*Almagest*); Ptolemy explicitly embraced the Babylonians’ observations from the 7th c. BC forwards; precession
- Likewise, his work provided the foundations up to and including Copernicus almost 1500 years later! A towering figure!!!
- Astrology (*Tetrabiblos* = 4 books)
- Geography (longitude and latitude; integrated with mathematical astronomy)
- Optics
- Harmonics
- Planetary Hypotheses (Cosmology)
- He lived and worked in Alexandria, Egypt
- Incredibly influential, with works translated i.a. into Arabic and Latin
- With Euclid, the most important scholar of mathematics and cosmography in antiquity
The (Aristotelian) Natural Philosophical Foundations for Ptolemy’s Astrology

• What you need to know:
  • Aristotelian Cosmology
  • Aristotelian Matter Theory
Aristotle’s Cosmos
Aristotle’s Matter Theory

- Four elements: Earth, Air, Fire, Water
- None exist purely in the world
- Only compounded with other elements
- Each is composed of a set of two opposite primary qualities: hot and cold, moist and dry
- Elements can transmute into each other by changing their qualitative dynamic
- Basis for alchemical analyses
- This theory is used by Ptolemy to explain how planetary influences work
Aristotle’s Matter Theory
Structure of Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos*

- The root text in the tradition of scientific astrology in the West
- Book I: Introduction
  - Philosophical arguments for astrology’s validity as a science and its utility
  - Planets, signs and dignities
  - Philosophical justification for traditional doctrines
- Book II: General astrology or revolutions
- III & IV: Nativities (including the question about conception vs. birth)
- No interrogations or elections
Ptolemaic Astrology

- A very brief introduction to Ptolemy’s scientific/philosophical astrology
- Relationship of what we call astronomy and astrology (*Tetrabiblos* I.1)
- That astrology is a science in its own right (I.2); that astrology is knowable (the epistemological dimension)
- Ptolemy’s influential analysis of celestial influences (I.4); how celestial influences work
- Ptolemy’s simplistic scientific analysis in comparison to medieval analyses 1000 years later in the 13\textsuperscript{th} century—in two weeks time!
Planetary Influences
4 Primary Qualities

- *Tetrabiblos* I.4:
- Sun: heating (+), drying (-)
- Moon: moistening (+), drying (-)
- Saturn: cooling (+), drying (-)
- Mars: drying (+) and burning (+)
- Jupiter: heating; temperate active force
- Venus: moistens (+), warms (-)
- Mercury: drying and moistening
- Motion and light
- Then: I.5 Benefic and Malefic planets
- I.6: Masculine and Feminine
- I.17-24: Dignities
Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD)

• Everyone has heard of him
• One of the most influential Church Fathers
• Profoundly influential later on among both Catholics and Protestants
• Here we will focus on his attack on astrology in *The City of God against the Pagans* (413-427 AD)
• Also known for his *Confessions* and *On Christian Doctrine*
• Astrology vis-à-vis fate and free will and in relation to divination
• Against the pagans, i.e. within the Roman Empire
Astrology in the Roman Empire

• In relation to the divination that took place in the Roman Republic
• From time immemorial and within the political sphere
• Mainly augury (flights of birds, chickens eating)
• But also haruspicy/extispicy (reading the patterns on livers and other exta)
• Much like the Babylonians had, and also in a political context
Astrology and Politics

• For the Babylonians: omens for the king and the city
• Then shift ca. 5th century BC from the king to individuals, with omens and then horoscopes
• Different development in Rome
• First: divination only for the collective, i.e. for the Senate and People
• Then, ca. 1st century BC, astrology begins to arise as a personal form of divination
• With the rise of the powerful individual in politics: Marius and Sulla, then Pompey and Crassus; and Julius Caesar
Augustus Caesar (27 BC-14 AD)

- Julius Caesar’s adoptive son
- The first Roman Emperor (although he would not have called himself that)
- With Augustus, astrology really comes into its own within the Roman political and social spheres
- Augustus projected his power by minting coins with an image of Capricorn
- First laws against astrological practice in 11 AD (to control the use of private divination)
Used from 40/41 BC
Claudius Tiberius Caesar (14-37 AD)

- The first true imperial lover of astrology
- He himself knew and practiced astrology
- Thrasyllus and Balbillus Claudius Tiberius
- The most famous astrologers of the day
- Spawned a generation of powerful astrologers who served the likes of Nero, Caligula and every other Roman Emperor
Tiberius Claudius Nero (42 BC-37 AD)
Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (37-68 AD, r. from 54)
Rise of Christianity

- Constantine’s Conversion to Christianity ca. 312 AD
- Christianity as the state religion
- Astrology vis-à-vis divination in response to Roman polytheistic paganism and its relation to the Gods
- This was the context in which Augustine wrote
- Towards the end of his life he influentially attacked astrology in numerous texts
- And in relation to divination
But

• In his early life he learned and was devoted to astrology as a branch of learning

• In fact, he himself was a grammarian in the ancient sense of teaching the liberal arts

• Which included astronomy and astrology

• But his attitude changed over time, and especially after his conversion to Christianity
Earlier Critics of Astrology

• Cicero, *De divinatione* (ca. 45 BC)
• Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* (2\textsuperscript{nd}/3\textsuperscript{rd} c. AD); sceptical arguments
• Plotinus (204/5-270 AD); the first Neoplatonist
• Augustine— the most important/influential early Christian attack on astrology
City of God, V.1-7

- Let us now briefly examine his extremely influential attack on astrology in relation to fate and free will
- His configuration of astrology within divinatory practices (not arts, since they did not offer true modes of knowledge)
- In two weeks, we will explore how Thomas Aquinas transformed Augustine’s views and thereby resuscitated astrology as a legitimate form of knowledge in the 13th century
Next Week

• From Late Antiquity to the European Middle Ages
• Via Two Translation Movements
• [1] From Greek and Persian into Arabic (9th century AD)
• [2] From Arabic into Latin (12th century AD)
• Astrology in Islam and Judaism
• Institutional Foundations with the first proper European universities