

A Concise History of Astrology

by Kelly Surtees

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What Is Astrology?

Astrology is an ancient body of knowledge originally developed as a timing system. Shepherds in the Near East plotted the daily motion of the Sun and Moon to keep track of time. Through the ages, astrology has both flirted with fate and danced with death, undergoing a number of reincarnations to find itself where it is today.

Astrology has a mixed reputation in today’s world. As a practice, astrology involves first determining where the planets and stars are in the heavens at any given moment and then interpreting these placements. Charts were originally calculated by hand, until computers took care of the complex mathematical calculations. A modern birth (or natal) chart looks like a round cake with twelve uneven slices. Around the outside of the circle lie the twelve zodiac constellations (the ecliptic). These constellations were chosen by observers over the centuries because, like a great cosmic train track, they mark the path of the Sun and planets as they move through the sky. The twelve sections inside the circle are known as the “houses.” The Sun, Moon, and planets are arrayed in a unique order within the houses, according to the time, date, and place of birth.

Astrology is like a guide for the soul. A birth chart, which is created using the symbols of the sky, details the promise of a life set in motion at the moment of birth. Your birth chart is a map of the

sky at the precise time you were born, looking up from the place on Earth where you arrived. Countries, kingships, diseases, and business ventures all have a moment when they begin. When a birth chart is carefully interpreted by a trained astrologer, it provides answers to questions about the fate of the entity the chart represents.

Ancient Sky: Primordial Philosophy

Humans have, for millennia, searched the natural world for signs of the state of the Earth and indications of what is to come. Observations of the sky are no different from the works of shamans, East Indian elders, and indigenous peoples across the globe. The premise that what happens in the natural world reflects what is happening in an individual’s inner world is captured in the following quote from *The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*: “That which is Below corresponds to that which is Above, and that which is Above corresponds to that which is Below, to accomplish the miracles of the One Thing.” Commonly reduced to “As above, so below,” this ancient philosophy underpinned the work of the great minds of the past, such as Plato, Aristotle,¹ Pythagoras, and Ptolemy.²

The planets and stars were thought to be “god’s alphabet,” and those who could read the sky were able to interpret his messages to the people. Ancient cultures (Babylonian and Egyptian) believed that the Sun spent the hours of darkness in the Underworld, only to emerge at dawn. The Sun was the heav-

enly body linked to light and dark. The Moon was used to mark out short cycles of time. Through these simple observations, the ancients noted that some celestial lights did *not* move and some *did* (the word “planet” comes from a Greek term meaning “wanderer”). The Moon was the most obvious moving light — appearing Full like a brilliant white disc against the backdrop of the star-filled night once every 28 days.

Stone structures (like Stonehenge) were built to capture the Sun’s light at its highest or lowest (solstice) points. Temples were created to mark the pre-dawn rise of certain stars at special times of the year. Most famously watched for was Sirius, the “dog star,” whose heliacal rising (just before the Sun) was used to time the annual flooding of the Nile and the arrival of the hottest months of the Egyptian year.

From these daily, monthly, and annual observations of the heavens, specific events came to be linked with the appearance or disappearance of certain stars and planets. Over thousands of years of observation, a body of knowledge emerged that incorporated the experience and work of ancient Chaldean, Babylonian, Persian, Roman, Greek, Indian, and Egyptian priests, stargazers and astrologers, scientists, theologians, scholars, and mathematicians.

Astrology’s Origins

Astrology began in the area now known as Iraq (historically, Mesopotamia and Chaldea). Lunar phases were first recorded in 15,000 B.C.E. The ear-

liest fragments of astrological tablets are dated to 2300 B.C.E. in Mesopotamia. The Venus Tablet of Amisdaqa, circa 1600 B.C.E., contains detailed information about the movement of Venus in the heavens (changing from evening to morning star via a three-day “disappearance” from the sky) and predictions for her return.

Astrology has moved in and out of favour throughout history, but only during the past 200 years, in its most recent reinvention, has it incorporated personal spirituality and psychology. Previously, astrology was a divine science known only to the wise men or priests. Calculations by mathematicians and scientists assisted in specific astronomical discoveries, so planetary motions and distances from the Earth could be predicted, and specific maps of the heavens could be drawn.

Astrology was considered one of the three most important sciences (along with astronomy and mathematics) by all major cultures from the 6th century B.C.E. to around 400 C.E. Developments in one field invariably led to new understandings in other primary fields. In time, this would play a part in astrology’s downfall, as scientific advances seemed to disprove some of the fundamental principles of astrology.

The Rise and Fall of Astrology

The use of astrology in its current form — creating a natal chart, with houses (divisions of the sky) — has been around for more than 2,000 years (the oldest known birth chart dates back to 410 B.C.E.). Astrology was practised for about 2,000 years before then, but mostly for the exclusive use of king or country.

The constellations were first established around 3000 B.C.E. Even 1,000 years before this, Babylonians and Assyrians scanned the heavens for omens of their fate and mapped the course of planets; from their observations, they began to make predictions about the weather, the harvest, drought, famine, war, peace, and the fates of kings.

The earliest recordings of mathematical astronomy (around 1500 B.C.E.) paved the way for accurate star charts centuries later. When Alexander the Great brought Babylon under Greek

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rule around 330 B.C.E., much knowledge was shared between Egyptian, Babylonian, and Greek scholars.

It was in the sixth century B.C.E. that the sky was first formally divided into twelve sections, each linked with the specific star rising at each consecutive Full Moon. This division was the precursor to the twelve houses of the birth chart still in use today. Astrologer-kings, said to rule throughout Mesopotamia (circa 700 B.C.E.), drew on their knowledge of the sky to foretell periods of good fortune or famine for their kingdoms. By the fourth century B.C.E., horoscopes expanded into the middle class and were drawn up for ordinary individuals, not just those in power.

Astrology’s revered place in society continued through the period of Christ, with the first two systematic treatises on astrology published by Vettius Valens and Manilius in the first century C.E. By the 900s, the Academy of Wisdom in Baghdad had expanded to play an integral part in the growth of Middle Eastern culture. Many ancient Greek texts were translated into Arabic, spreading knowledge throughout the Islamic world. In fact, the city of Baghdad was founded in 762 C.E. at a time chosen by astrologers.

Tiberius, Emperor of Rome (14–37 C.E.), employed a secret police force of astrologers to identify rivals. By his time, the high esteem in which astrology was held can be seen in the naming of the days of the week after the seven planetary deities. Astrology thrived through a golden age as humans lived strongly connected to, aware of, and at the mercy of the physical world.

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through the ages. Roman Emperor Constantine officially endorsed Christianity in 312 C.E., plunging astrology and other pagan practises into a thousand years of darkness — at least throughout Rome and Greece. The vast body of knowledge already available to astrologers was removed from public access, and the general populace was encouraged to convert to the Church. The rulers and religious leaders from Constantine’s time until the Middle Ages were in so much fear of the knowledge and magic in the study of the stars that astrology was made a crime punishable by death. St. Augustine (354–430 C.E.) openly condemned astrology as much of the Western world descended into the Dark Ages.

Although astrology (and its practitioners) was discredited throughout the Roman empire, it began to flourish in the Islamic world. The first school of astrology was opened in 777 C.E. in Baghdad. During the European Renaissance in the 12th century (a precursor to the great Renaissance 300 years later), astrology enjoyed a revival.³ The birth chart for King Edward II (1284) survives to this day.

In 1348, King Philip VI of France received a response to his request regarding the “calamity” of the Black Plague: The medical faculty of the University of Paris linked it to a conjunction of Saturn, Mars, and Jupiter in Aquarius, which was exacerbated by an eclipse.⁴

Astrology flourished during the great Renaissance as numerous ancient texts were translated from Greek into Latin. (This practise had been blocked by the Church more than 1,000 years earlier.) Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, the study and practise of astrology was revitalised and began to be taught in universities across Europe.⁵ During the reigns of King James I to Charles I (in the 1600s), horoscopes were often cast at the beginning of Parliament to determine how it would fare.

The medical applications of astrology were explored and helped to bring this ancient practise back into contemporary life. Astrology was particularly important in diagnosing and treating disease. Nicholas Culpeper followed the advice of Hippocrates, the father of medicine, and studied the art of astrology. Culpeper’s seminal work,

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commonly known as *Culpeper's Herbal*, was first published in 1653 and has been continually in print ever since. A decumbiture chart (a birth chart for medical purposes) was set for the time a patient fell ill or had an accident. Specific herbs and tonics were prescribed according to whichever planets or signs were determined to describe the illness. This practise is still in use today.

The difficult relationship between the Church and astrology continued, but science now became astrology's nemesis. The death knell came with the confirmation by Galileo (in 1632) of Copernicus's theory that the Earth and planets moved around the Sun. Galileo himself supported astrology, drawing up charts of family and wealthy clients; however, astronomers continued to pursue scientific facts to prove their work. Even though astrology was based on thousands of years of empirical observation, it could not pass the rigor-

Jung did pioneering work on archetypes and the psyche which blended astrology and psychology.

ous tests the scientific communities now demanded.

Over the course of about 200 years, astrology slowly fell from a respected sister science of astronomy into a tool that few used with any great skill. It was relegated to fortune-telling status. The practise of astrology was kept alive in the spiritualist movements and among those wise enough to perceive the narrowness of science.

Simplified forms of astrology evolved in modern times as the masses began to embrace this magical information. The advent of specialised software programmes means that anyone can now calculate a natal chart with the press of a few buttons. This has led to the growth of "fairground" astrology, which refers to making simple statements about a

person's life based on their birth chart — the kind of delineation that might be offered in an astrology reading at a fair or festival, rather than the comprehensive analysis made by a professional astrologer who has taken the time to work through the layers of the chart. In fairground astrology, one makes simplistic judgments by eyeballing a birth chart (e.g., you have three planets in your 7th house; therefore you will have three marriages). Due to the general public's easy access to natal charts, interpretations can be and are made by those who perhaps have only a passing interest in astrology and haven't completed formal study. These interpretations, while based on astrological data, don't take into consideration the subtle complexities of chart delineation and perhaps do astrology more disservice than good.

Astrology in Modern Society

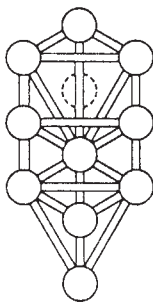
Astrology has reinvented itself once again and is now being taught at universities across the world, from Kepler College in the United States to Bath Spa University in the United Kingdom. The

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spiritualist church, the theosophists, and Alan Leo all helped to keep astrology close to the surface of humanity's awareness during the 19th century. Carl Jung's correspondence with Sigmund Freud, around the start of the 20th century, expressed his fascination and experience with astrology. Jung did pioneering work on archetypes and the psyche which blended astrology and psychology into a cohesive, practical philosophy. This has set a place for astrology in the study of the psyche, and many counselling and therapeutic phrases are now incorporated into the modern language of astrological interpretation. This also reflects the shift from a fated human philosophy (of the ancient cultures) to our modern belief in our ability to transform our fate or lot in life.

No one can predict where astrology will go from here. It has struggled to regain its originally revered status, but the question must be asked: Is this struggle the fault of astrology's limitations, or those of the modern mind? In our pursuit of scientific proof, we have lost touch with the unexplainable yet observable magic in our natural world. As humanity collectively embraces an increasingly holistic consciousness, where the interconnectedness of life is given due respect, it is no surprise to see astrology once more climbing the ladder of mainstream respectability. Astrology reflects the connection between the

heavens and the Earth, and humanity again turns to the heavens for divine connection while we begin to more fully understand our impact on, and our ties to, the physical planet beneath our feet.

Notes

1. In the work, *On Generation and Corruption*, Aristotle wrote: "The earth is bound up in some necessary way with the local motions of the heavens, so that all power that resides in this world is governed by that above."
2. Ptolemy wrote the *Tetrabiblos* in the 2nd century C.E. This is considered the major treatise on astrology in classical times and is available in English translation. While working in the great library in Alexandria, Ptolemy devised "predictive mathematical models" to observe the motion of the planets, not just the Sun and Moon. He also mapped the longitude (sky position) of more than a thousand stars. *Tetrabiblos* was a summary of all major astronomical and astrological techniques in practise at that time.
3. Saint Thomas Aquinas, a 13th-century scholar who was a recognised influence in the Catholic Church, believed that astrology and the Christian faith could co-exist. In the *Summa Theologica*, he acknowledged the influence of the planets on human affairs and attempted to reconcile astrology with the Christian doctrine of free will.
4. In 14th-century England, poet Geoffrey Chaucer was a high court official to Edward III. Besides the famous *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer wrote the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, which set out the basics of astrology at that time.
5. Regiomontanus (1436–1476) was a professor of both astrology and astronomy at the University of Vienna; he was responsible for the compilation of some of the early ephemerides

— and for devising the house system that bears his name.

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Kelly Surtees is passionate about astrology and respected for her knowledge and insight. A professional astrologer and writer since 2002, she offers private readings to clients around the globe. Kelly has lectured internationally and is known for her informative and inspiring teaching style. Her astrology articles and columns regularly appear in a variety of international media. Kelly holds the "Practitioners Diploma in Astrology" (Prac. Dip.) from the Federation of Australian Astrologers (FAA). Her Web site is: www.kellysurtees.com

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