



*A Brief History of Ancient Astrology*, by Roger Beck. Blackwell, 2007. ISBN 1-4051-1074-0. xiii + 159pp; Fig. 10, Tab. 4.

Reviewed by John M. McMahon  
Le Moyne College  
[mcmahon@lemoyne.edu](mailto:mcmahon@lemoyne.edu)

In *A Brief History of Ancient Astrology* Roger Beck (hereafter B.) examines both the system and actual practice of ancient astrology as it flourished in the Classical World from the 1st Century BCE to the end of the 4th Century CE. Along the way he discusses in fine detail the personal aspects of astrology as evidenced by extant horoscopes as well as the significant role it played in Greco-Roman society and politics. Enriched by the author's knowledgeable, measured and sensitive treatment of an intellectual construct often regarded as a discredited pseudo-science, the book is nicely supported by references to and analyses of ancient texts and is helpfully elucidated by a number of figures and tables. Though many of the conceptual underpinnings and practices of ancient astrology are far removed from the modern scientific approach to the cosmos and thus present us with formidable intellectual challenges, B. has produced a well organized and carefully written work that provides the reader with a wealth of valuable information about its subject and offers keen insights into an integral yet often misunderstood cultural component of the Classical World.

The book may be thought of as organized into three main sections. The initial section, comprising the preface and first two chapters, offers a definition of astrology, an account of its origins and its eventual acceptance into the cultural matrix of the Mediterranean. The five chapters that cohere as the central section of the book are devoted to the

theory, construction and interpretation of horoscopes. The final two chapters expand the discussion to include the consequences of the widespread belief in the efficacy of astrology and provide specific reasons why an understanding of ancient astrology still merits our attention.

In the Preface (xi-xiii) B. lays out his program of inquiry and explication. He contends that an historical narrative modeled on the progressive and diachronic development of ancient mathematics and astronomy cannot be applied to astrology because of its inherently conservative nature. His approach, rather, will be to present “an *account* of various aspects of the subject,” focusing specifically on the construction, interpretation and analysis of horoscopes and choosing “depth and detail of example over breadth of coverage” (xii).

In Chapter One (“Introduction: What Was Astrology in Ancient Greece and Rome?”) B. lays out his own approach to the study of astrology: namely, that it is positioned in the realm of cultural and intellectual history rather than in that of the history of science. Although in practice astrology depended largely upon mathematical astronomy, whose models generated the tables upon which astrological predictions were based, the “dichotomizing paradigm of the history of science (astronomy good, astrology bad)” (2) has been an obstacle to its proper study. This has come about for three reasons: in the modern scientific era the actual *study* of astrology has been trivialized because of the subject matter itself; today’s approach fails to recognize the importance of the ancient model that sees astronomy and astrology as complementary to one another as predictive undertakings; and the emphasis in extant texts and horoscopes on astrological predictions tied closely to the sphere of human activity belies an authentic and attendant “search for metaphysical and theological meaning in the stars” (3). The remainder of the chapter is devoted to the distinction made by the ancients between astronomy and astrology. Focusing on the beginning sections of Ptolemy’s *Almagest*, a comprehensive astronomical work rooted in the mathematical form of theoretical philosophy, and on his *Tetrabiblos*, a similarly comprehensive treatise on astrology, B. clearly explains the scientific character of the former while at the same time demonstrating that the subject matter of the latter is neither “a separate discipline from astronomy” nor “an unscientific application of astronomy” (7). Indeed, according to Ptolemy it simply uses the observable as well as the predictable configurations of celestial objects to ascertain the changes that they will effect on earth. Ptolemy, however, also advises that one

avoid both an expectation of absolute certainty (as in astronomy) and an outright denial that conclusions can be drawn at all about the influence of the celestial on the terrestrial and human realm.

The first part of Chapter Two (“Origins and Types of Astrology. The Transfer of Astrology from Babylon. The Pseudo-History of Astrology: ‘Alien Wisdom’”) outlines the kinds of astrology practiced by the ancients. Genethliology, focusing on celestial configurations at the birth of an individual, was the predominant form of Greek astrology. Thus, the drawing and interpretation of horoscopes constituted a major part of astrological practice. Interestingly, a similar methodology was even applied to entire groups of peoples, to cities or to nations. As its name implies, catarchic (“beginning”) astrology sought to determine when the most opportune time would be to initiate an action by looking at celestial configurations at any given time. Immediate questions about events and circumstances could always be answered through interrogatory astrology by simply looking to the current configurations for answers. Lastly, non-systematized omen astrology interpreted random natural occurrences that appear in the heavens, especially meteorological phenomena such as lightning and thunder. The remainder of the chapter outlines how the civil and professional astrology of Babylon eventually made its way westward into Egypt and the Mediterranean in the post-Alexandrian period and became the basis for Greek astrology. Worthwhile points made by B. here are that the observations of the heavens made by astrologers were, in fact, important as a form of scientific inquiry despite what the eventual information was used for and that in the end the long history and systematization of Babylonian astrology, coupled with its exotic origins, was a significant factor in its acceptance in the Mediterranean World.

With Chapter Three (“The Product: How to Construct a Simple Horoscope, Ancient Style”) B. embarks on the long journey of explaining the conceptual bases and the technicalities of the Greek horoscope that will take the reader through the five chapters at the heart of the book. First and foremost, it is an indication of the intricately woven nature of the subject matter that this and subsequent chapters include a series of schematic diagrams to supplement B.’s explanations. This is entirely appropriate since Greek astrology, in a marked departure from its Babylonian forebear, is quite dependent on geometry and on the real or perceived geometrical relationships among celestial objects and the astrological signs themselves, termed “aspects.” With the various aspects charted on a circle representing the twelve divisions of the

zodiacal signs through the year (Fig. 3.1), astrological significance is determined from their geometrical positions measured in degrees from one another as seen from a terrestrial observation point in a geocentric system. The term “trine,” for example, describes the relationship of signs that are 120 degrees from another, “quartile” for those that are 90 degrees apart and so on. Since positional astronomy serves as the ultimate basis for any astrological determinations, the actual locations of the seven planets (including the Sun and Moon) as they each wander eastward through the astrological signs are the primary data upon which genethliology is predicated. Thus, while the movements of each of planets were deemed autonomous by the ancients, the regularity of those movements enabled observers both to predict planetary positions into the future and to reconstruct them in the past, an important scientific achievement in and of itself. Indeed, for adults seeking astrological information individualized horoscopes were drawn up that were calculated for the exact time of their births by positional information recorded in texts and tables. B. astutely points out, too, that familiarity with this system of prediction and reconstruction based on the ever changing planetary positions afforded astrologers and their clients some real sense of the actual cosmic situation.

Chapter Four ("Structure and Meaning in the Horoscope, 1: The Aspects and the 'Places'") examines in detail what an individual horoscope signifies and what important factors determine how the imputed value of both good and bad aspects operate within the larger semiotic framework of birth-oriented astrology. In other words, B. sees genethliology as a coherent and effective language based upon a complex of assumptions and rules generated from astronomical configurations (38-40). For example, the circle of the heavens was divided into twelve zodiac "places" (*dodekatropos*) that correspond to modern astrology's "houses." These places serve as the cardinal points, as it were, of a conceptualized positional system, consonant with the dichotomous tendency of Greek thought, that ultimately determined positive and negative significance. The places were also intricately related to one another by their positions along the circle; and, in a visual partitioning of the cosmos similar to Roman augury and auspicy, within this larger arrangement the positions of "ascendant" (where signs rise), of "midheaven" (on the meridian), of the setting point ("descendant") and of "lower midheaven" (opposite "midheaven" and below the observer's feet) further determine what a horoscope signifies. Taken as an analog to human terrestrial existence, the positioning of the signs was seen as

representative of the course of life as well. Evidence from the existing documentation, however, indicates that a preconceived notion of a normative life marked by privilege and societal status was assumed for the male whose horoscope was drawn; women, slaves and others seem to have been excluded. Indeed, as B. puts it, formal genethliology was not for the "riff-raff" (49).

The multitude of concepts explicated in the nineteen pages of Chapter Five ("Structure and Meaning on the Horoscope, 2: The Zodiac and its Signs") is extraordinary. In short, B. introduces the essential astronomical realities as they affect the operations of Greek astrology and in particular focuses on "the zodiac and its signs as a self-contained system" (51). One of the key ideas is that the zodiac and its signs move on a regular basis westward against the background of the stationary twelve places. In this sense the places are tied to a localized sky while the zodiac is truly celestial. Combined with the regular movements of the seven planets eastward, this relationship presents numerous positional possibilities at any given time. Important, too, are the sky's seasonal divisions, with each of the four quadrants of the heavens containing three zodiac signs, and the Sun's annual progress through them, the whole being a deeper structure that echoes the cycle of human life itself. In this context B. ably demonstrates how the "contraries" (up, down; high, low; North, South; etc.) combined with the seasonal characteristics (heat, dryness, cold, wetness) described by Ptolemy function as a complex system of interpretation applied to the human life cycle (56-9). Other associations of a distinctly more metaphorical nature appear as well in dividing up and grouping the signs, some based on gender opposition, others on a polarity of light and darkness and, most significantly, on the geometrical relationships of the aspects themselves. There even exists a complex of friendship and enmity between signs and groups of signs, essentially a transferal of human characteristics to the heavens. B. concludes the chapter by explaining how the individual characters of the signs themselves were determined by the earthly referents that they represented (the sign of Leo, for example, being similar to actual lions), and such associations eventually marked the individual humans who were influenced by those signs even in their occupations.

Chapter Six ("Structure and Meaning on the Horoscope, 3: The Planets") concentrates on the seven planets, either as divinities in their own right or as the "*living* instruments of the gods" (71), whose ever changing positions against the background of signs increase the complexity of the relationships among the various components of the

horoscope. At the outset B. emphasizes the important distinction between the astronomical reality of a planet's location in any given sign and the astrological fantasy (as he puts it) about the value and meaning of a particular configuration since the latter makes the human being the focus of observed, predictable and purposeful cosmic events. The specific planetary influences on humans is drawn from a lengthy passage from the *Anthologies* of Vettius Valens (74-76), after which B. treats a variety of topics related to the role of the planets in genethliology and larger human affairs: under what circumstances planets can be deemed either beneficial or damaging (76-79), the special cases of the Sun and Moon in their demonstrable effects on the terrestrial natural environment (79-81) and the role of the planets in the late antique belief in the ascent and descent of the soul (81-82). In addition, each of the planets themselves was deemed to have gender, which, however, was not immutable and, altered by astrological conditions, was, as B. contends, closer to postmodern ideas of gender construction (83). The chapter delves even more deeply into the realm of planetary influence with B.'s analysis of the ways in which they may be weakened or strengthened according as where each one was located based on a complex conceptual system of "houses," "humiliations" and "exaltations" (84-87). A translation of a "deluxe" horoscope serves to close out the chapter and to illustrate how ordinary and dry details of planetary positions could be made to come alive with the right kind of narrative color that would embroider the bare facts of planetary tables for one seeking direction and guidance based on what genethliology could provide for him about the day he was born.

With Chapter Seven ("Horoscopes and Their Interpretation") B. applies the wealth of information from previous chapters to demonstrate how horoscopes may be interpreted. He begins with a discussion of the extant astrological handbooks, conceding that there is nothing definitive in any of them to dispel the inherent ambiguity in the process of interpretation. Indeed, B. suggests that such handbooks were actually "show pieces" whose main purpose was to allow an astrologer to demonstrate mastery of the process and that there is actually too much information rather than too little (92). Yet even with such a vast reservoir of celestial configurations and relationships available to provide an almost inexhaustible supply of interpretive possibilities, the outcomes dictated by them remain only potential ones since actual life circumstances play a role (93). On the other hand, astrologers did use the horoscopes of those already dead as a kind of empirical check on known outcomes, validating the assumption that in hindsight sufficient evidence

for any given outcome is present within the abundance of celestial possibilities, an example of rudimentary kind of empiricism. Such horoscopes are termed literary horoscopes, and the bulk of the chapter is devoted to close analyses of a number of these exemplary ancient astrological documents. B. provides helpful schematic representations of the celestial configurations for two particular horoscopes (figs. 7.1 and 7.2) as well as a detailed chart (Table 7.1) for a third. Worthy of note here are the horoscope of the emperor Hadrian (95), the catarchic horoscope of the would-be emperor Leontius, whose astrologers were later shown to have missed important information (95-96), the complex horoscope of Ceionius Rufius Albinus drawn by Firmicus Maternus (97-100) and the systematically empirical approach taken by the astrologer Vettius Valens in analyzing the horoscope of six individuals who underwent a crisis at sea (101-111). Most striking of all, however, is a Byzantine-era example purporting to be an actual horoscope of Islam but actually a fiction fabricated a century and a half after its imagined casting on September 1, 621 CE (111-118). B. regards this as “the best example of after-the-fact horoscopol interpretation on a grand scale” (112), and his commentary and analysis of this fiction deftly expose the many ways that celestial configurations can be cleverly manipulated to serve political and cultural ends.

The theoretical underpinnings of astrological predictions about the length of life or date of death of individuals — and especially about emperors, practices deemed illegal in Roman Imperial times, serve as the subject of Chapter Eight (“A Matter of Life and Death: ‘Starters,’ Destroyers,’ and ‘Length of Life.’ Some Sociopolitical Implications of Astrology”). As B. explains, the most common way that the length of life could be determined was simply by calculating the arc of longitude between two points on a natal chart and equating the number of years with that number, each degree being equal to a year. In such cases a so-called birth-star (*aphetes*) and death-star (*anairetes*) were accordingly identified in the horoscope as causal agents to underscore the validity of the astrological method. B.’s analysis of a rather early (72 BCE) literary horoscope (accompanied by fig. 8.1) follows to illustrate the above principles, and it becomes clear how easily an astrologer could manipulate the many alternatives available to arrive at any given conclusion. The horoscope of Hadrian is another example of how in retrospect an astrologer could select and then interpret only those celestial configurations that would lead to an already known conclusion, in this case that Hadrian did in fact become an emperor. Figure 8.2

accompanies B.'s discussion, which posits two important considerations for the emperor's horoscope. First, the actual arrangement of all the celestial bodies at the time of Hadrian's birth could not have been actually observed by any human being, but it could be — and was — imagined by an astrologer based on his mental picture of the state of the heavens at that instant. Secondly, an element of fiction appears in the way the astrologer posits a "bright fixed star in the twentieth degree" of Aquarius (which has no such bright star), apparently in order to suggest an inevitable conferral upon Hadrian of imperial power and prestige (126). In the final part of the chapter (126-131) B. shifts his attention to the uneasy relationship between astrology and the law during the Roman Imperial period, focusing on the influence of well-connected astrologers like Thrasyllus and Balbillus in the workings of Roman imperial government and on the kinds of recorded astrological data they — and others in their profession — were able to access.

In the brief final chapter of the book ("Conclusion : Why Bother with Ancient Astrology in the Twenty-First Century?") B. summarizes his ideas. He contends that ancient astrology, specifically the literary horoscopes that constitute an after-the-event analysis of an individual life in light of a celestial configuration at the time of birth, provide both the idiom for relating stories of human lives and their meaning. Likewise, genethliology is more than simply a system of signs but rather a "discourse rooted in a language" whose text is expressed in the visible heavens (133-34). The phraseology of this discursive language on the face of it imparts factual knowledge describing the actual situation in the heavens at any given moment, but as a "bundle of signs ... arranged syntactically" it also affords "a meaning over and above the meanings of the individual signs" (135). Consequently, concludes B., whether or not the signs are deemed to be the authors themselves of the language or are representatives of some higher power's directives, astrologers repeat and interpret the "star-talk" and further develop what they believe to be the inherent meaning of that discourse.

There is little to criticize in *A Brief History of Ancient Astrology* and much to commend it to the interested reader. B. makes the most of his comprehensive knowledge of the subject to bring to the fore the most important features of ancient astrology while wisely avoiding material that is at best marginal or distracting (as in 68-69). That said, a good deal of the discussion does require deliberate and sustained attention on the part of the reader, though B.'s introduction of colloquial language and familiar diction throughout the work is refreshing and aids understanding



(e.g. 76-77: "good guys ... bad guys"). On the other hand, B.'s explanations of actual celestial phenomena, as clear and well illustrated as they are (e.g., 50-51), might be supplemented for the general reader by a beginner's guide to the workings of the actual sky. A good candidate for this is Ken Hewitt White's *Patterns in the Sky: An Introduction to Stargazing* (Cambridge, MA: 2006), especially 6-10 and 14, which presents in simple language and graphics the actual relationship of the earth and sky. The endnotes (137-149) nicely provide additional information but are not overly numerous or complicated. The bibliographical references (150-154) likewise will well serve the reader who wishes to pursue the subject matter further. The book is generally free from technical oversights with only one typographical error noted in passing (fig. 7.1, p. 96).

One final observation is in order. Astrology has been rightfully discredited as a mere pseudo-science in the modern world, yet there is no little irony in the fact that while we in the developed world have a far better understanding of the realities of the cosmos than did the ancient astrologers, because of our thoughtless use of misdirected and excessive outdoor lighting far fewer people today can actually experience those very stars and planets that figured so prominently in the world view of both ancient astrologers and the general population. In effect, many of us must now imagine what the nighttime heavens are actually like from our terrestrial viewpoint in much the same way that ancient astrologers did when they imagined celestial configurations during daylight in reconstructing horoscopes for their clients.