
A Brief History of Ancient Astrology by Roger Beck

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Reviewed by
Katharina Volk
Columbia University
kv2018@columbia.edu

Until now, readers wishing to learn about Greco-Roman astrology had to make their way through the 627 pages of Auguste Bouché-Leclercq's magisterial discussion [1899] or otherwise rely on the much shorter, though methodologically more sophisticated, introduction by Tamsyn Barton [1994]. While both books will no doubt continue to be consulted as standard reference works, Roger Beck's eminently readable and indeed very brief *Brief History of Ancient Astrology* now presents the most convenient starting point for anybody who wants to understand how Greek and Roman astrologers constructed a horoscope and ascribed meaning to its individual features. Notwithstanding the book's title (no doubt imposed by the publisher), it is, as Beck himself avows, not in fact a history of ancient astrology, but rather a lucid account of how ancient astrology worked. The author has deliberately left aside such topics as the development of astrology throughout antiquity (which, owing to the fragmentary nature of our evidence and the inherent conservatism of the discipline, is hard to trace anyway), the history of astrological literature,¹ and the philosophical debates about the validity of astrology.² He also devotes little space (in chapter 8; see below) to the historical and political context of astrological practice, a topic treated at length by Cramer 1954 and given special emphasis in Barton 1994. The scope of the work is thus limited, but Beck's narrow focus on the technical aspects of his subject matter has resulted in a book that does an excellent job at enabling non-specialists (such as classicists and ancient

¹ On which see Gundel and Gundel 1966.

² Conveniently summarized in Long 1982.

historians) to grasp both the science that underlies ancient astrology and the mentality that drove it.

The book is divided into nine short chapters, beginning with an introduction (chapter 1) on the definition of astrology. Beck shows (with reference to Ptolemy) that while the ancients distinguished what we call astronomy from what we call astrology, they regarded them as related sciences: the first was concerned with predicting the movements of the heavenly bodies, the second with determining the influences of these movements on earthly events. Chapter 2 deals with the origin of astrology in Mesopotamia and its transfer *via* Egypt to Greece and Rome, drawing special attention to ancient constructions of this history as involving fantastically long time-spans and recourse to ‘alien wisdom’, that is, arcane knowledge associated with foreign countries of high intellectual prestige.

In chapter 3, Beck presents the basic elements of a horoscope, including the signs of the zodiac and their aspects; the planets and their position in the zodiac; and the movement of zodiac and planets through the fixed circle of the four centers (ascendant or *horoscopos*, midheaven, descendant, and lower midheaven). To clarify the subject, he uses the felicitous image of the zodiac as a clock-face, with the planets as seven dials moving at different speeds while the clock rotates steadily in the opposite direction (a modern version of Vitruvius’ visualization of the same phenomenon as seven ants moving in circles on a spinning potter’s wheel [*De arch.* 9.1.15]).

Chapters 4–6 are concerned with ‘Structure and Meaning in the Horoscope’. Chapter 4 returns to the aspects and also introduces the *dodecatropos* of twelve ‘places’ (the modern ‘houses’); chapter 5 discusses the signs of the zodiac, ways of grouping them, and methods of defining their (often hostile) relationships to one another; and chapter 6 treats the planets, their characteristics, and their effects.

In chapter 7, Beck turns to the interpretation of horoscopes. Surviving horoscopes from antiquity typically present only factual information on the position of signs and planets at the moment in question, without providing any exegesis as to the chart’s meaning. For interpretations, we have to rely on the discussion of horoscopes in the astrological literature, where the author’s interpretative skills are usually applied to the birth charts of conveniently already deceased

natives. Beck presents a number of examples, including the horoscope of Ceionius Rufius Albinus [Firmicus Maternus, *Math.* 2.29.10–20]; Vettius Valens' comparison of the horoscopes of six men who survived one and the same shipwreck [*Anthol.* 7.6]; and the Byzantine horoscope of Islam [L621 in Neugebauer and van Hoesen 1959].

Chapter 8 is concerned with astrology's dangerous claims to be able to predict the length of the native's life and to spot a person's predestination to become emperor—the horoscope of Hadrian reported by Hephaestion of Thebes [L76 in Neugebauer and van Hoesen 1959] serves as an example of the latter. In this context, Beck briefly discusses the Roman emperors' uneasy relationship with astrology, a practice they themselves employed for their own purposes but whose use by others they regarded with deep suspicion. Chapter 9 presents a short conclusion.

Written in a charming colloquial style in which the personal voice of the author is present throughout, full of well-explained examples from ancient sources, and furnished with useful diagrams, Beck's book is extremely user-friendly. Unlike Barton, who in her 1984 book made a number of important general points about the political function of astrology and about the ways the discipline was practiced (stressing in particular the connection between the fall of the Roman Republic and the rise of astrology, as well as the divide between the orally imparted expertise of actual astrologers and the purely epideictic nature of astrological treatises, which are 'useless' in practical terms), Beck does not endeavor to say anything new, but simply attempts to give a succinct summary of his subject, an undertaking in which he succeeds admirably. He does, however, appear to have the larger agenda of getting his readers to respect ancient astrology. Sounding at times even a tad defensive, Beck admits that the predictions furnished by astrology are unscientific, but stresses repeatedly that the features of a birth chart themselves are mere astronomical facts. Seeking in no way to vindicate astrology as a form of divination, Beck is nevertheless fascinated by astrology as a system of signification, a veritable language by means of which sets of astronomical phenomena can be experienced as deeply meaningful.

Thanks to Beck's book, readers are now able to listen to this kind of 'star-talk' with new appreciation.

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