

# The Rediscovery of Hellenistic Astrology in the Modern Period

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While the current movement in the astrological community to rediscover the ancient traditions of astrology, sometimes called the ‘post-modernist’ movement, is actually quite a recent phenomenon, having only just begun in the 1980’s,<sup>1</sup> the groundwork for it was laid over the course of the past century by scholars working outside of the astrological community who dedicated their work to the investigation of the history of astrology.

The most important efforts in this area were initiated by a group of scholars in Europe towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who set out on a mission to collect, catalogue and edit all of the existing manuscripts on astrology that were written in ancient Greek during the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods. This project, which was led by a Belgian scholar named Franz Cumont, took over fifty years to complete, and it entailed scouring the world’s libraries and private collections for ancient texts and manuscripts that had been copied and preserved over the long centuries since their original composition. This project culminated in the publication of a massive twelve volume compendium called the *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum* (*Catalogue of the Codices of the Greek Astrologers*), more commonly known simply by its acronym as the CCAG. Writing in the mid-1950’s, shortly after the CCAG had been completed, the historian Frederick Cramer related the story of this project

The most important modern effort of surveying Greek astrological literature has been concentrated in a single undertaking. About half a century ago a small band of classical philologists united under the leadership of Franz Cumont. They shared the desire to branch out from the stereotyped overconcentration on “classical” Greek and Latin literature. Their aim, successfully achieved in 1953 after more than fifty years, was to edit a catalogue of Greek astrological texts surviving in European libraries. Among those rallying to the cause, Franz Boll and Wilhelm Kroll were perhaps the two most significant figures. ... Since then twelve volumes of the *Catalogus codicum astrologorum Graecorum* have been published, all of them with long

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the recent history of this movement see Nicholas Campion, *The Traditional Revival in Modern Astrology: A Preliminary History*, *The Astrology Quarterly*, Volume 74, No. 1, Winter 2003

appendices in which portions of the texts themselves are printed. This corpus gives access to a vast mass of hitherto unknown or inadequately known Greek writings.<sup>2</sup>

This massive compendium, which was published in 12 volumes between 1898 and 1953, consists of critical editions of dozens of astrological texts and fragments which had been carefully sifted through, examined, and edited by diligent linguists and paleographers in order to produce published volumes of all of the extant Greek astrological texts from antiquity.

Producing a 'critical edition' of a text is a time-consuming process which involves gathering together all of the extant manuscripts and printed editions of the text, and then comparing the differences and variations in the manuscript tradition, with the final result being the reconstruction of the archetype of the original manuscript, or at least something closely approximating it. However, these critical editions are *not* translations of the original works, but rather, they are simply edited and printed editions of the texts themselves in their original language, with the critical apparatus, footnotes and other statements from the editors usually written in Latin, the standard scholarly language which anyone studying the history of science or classics would be expected to know. Thus, although this massive compendium of astrological material has been available in print since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it lay neglected, unknown and unused by those in the astrological community for the majority of the century due to the challenges involved in studying the ancient texts in their original languages.

The *CCAG* project began at a time when astrology was just coming out of a low-point in its history after its decline during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. During this time astrology was only kept alive in the west in the form of popular almanacs, and few serious astrological texts were written at the time. For all intents and purposes astrology, as a serious subject of study, had nearly died out during this time as a result of disuse and disrepute, and it was under these cultural circumstances that the editors of the *CCAG* began compiling their compendium. They were studying the traditions and transmission of an obsolete system with the expectation that it would shed some light on the religious beliefs of the ancient peoples who practiced it, as well as their cultural customs, their scientific methods, and other such peripheral concerns. Their interest was not in the actual astrological content of the texts themselves *per se*, because they did not consider the texts to be of any inherent practical value or to have any veracity in the techniques and ideas that they preserved. At times the editors of the astrological texts and other scholars who work in the field often even express their disgust with the astrological content of the texts, sometimes excessively, while other times in a way that seems more like they are simply paying lip service to the academic community by punctuating their reports on the technical content of the texts with statements expressing their distaste for it, in order to distance themselves from it and thus maintain their academic credibility in the eyes of their incredulous peers.

During the same period that the first volumes of the *CCAG* began to be published, around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the revival of astrology began in the west. It happened relatively quickly, through the

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics*, originally published in Philadelphia, 1954, reprinted by Ares Publishers, Chicago, IL, 1996, pg. 184.

efforts of a handful of astrologers who were simultaneously reviving the practice of astrology in the west as well as re-conceptualizing it. The pivotal figure in this revival is usually thought to be Alan Leo, the great popularizer of astrology. His work had the effect of reintroducing the practice of astrology in English, French and German speaking countries due to the reach of the Theosophical Society, which he was a devoted member of, and their various publishing houses. His work also had the effect of simplifying the technical practice of astrology drastically, while at the same time infusing it with a character based interpretation, which is exemplified by his motto “character is destiny”. Leo’s contemporary in the Theosophical Society, Sefarial, also wrote a number of semi-influential astrological works during this period, and he is also thought to have had a somewhat reduced impact in initiating this revival.<sup>3</sup>

Later in the century two other major figures with similar Theosophical inclinations, Marc Edmund Jones and Dane Rudhyar, made the revival and transformation of astrology complete with their religious, philosophical and technical augmentations of the system. Both emphasized the use of astrology within a psychological context and went to great lengths to graft the new modern discipline of psychology onto the core of the astrological construct, while at the same time introducing additional technical simplifications such as Jones’ so-called ‘planetary patterns’ and Rudhyar’s conceptualization of the lunation cycle.<sup>4</sup> It was this system, with its Theosophical overtones, psychological or character based orientation and simplified technical structure, which formed the basis of modern western astrology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This system was subsequently inherited by the large group of astrologers who entered the field during the 60’s and 70’s whereupon it became the instituted tradition for the majority of the community all the way into the present time.

It is interesting to note that these two parallel movements, the study of the history of astrology by academics and the revival of the actual practice of astrology by astrologers, were occurring almost simultaneously, although neither of these movements seem to have crossed paths or influenced one another other to any great extent during the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For the most part the astrological community remained unaware of the industrious activities of the scholars and the great advancements that were occurring in the understanding of the history and origins of astrology, while the academics seldom took notice of the practice of astrology in the modern world or consulted with astrologers in order to share the results of their findings. Thus, until very recently the astrological community has remained largely ignorant of the great flourishing of astrological scholarship that has occurred over the course of the past century and the important historical, theoretical and practical implications that it has on their field.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on Sefarial’s contribution see Kim Farnell, *The Astral Tramp: A Biography of Sefarial*, Ascella Publications, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly enough, both of these innovations have parallels in the ancient traditions. The *Yavanajataka* has a chapter on certain planetary ‘yogas’ which are similar in their purpose, if not their actual nature, to Jones’ ‘planetary patterns’. See Pingree, *The Yavanajataka*, vol. 2, chapter 36. Rudhyar’s lunation cycle on the other hand is paralleled by a similar type of ‘lunation cycle’ presented in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century author Vettius Valens which has 11 divisions, rather than Rudhyar’s 8. See Vettius Valens, *The Anthology*, Book 2, Ch. 36. Of course, neither Jones nor Rudhyar would have been aware of these techniques that were used in previous traditions, so it is interesting that they generated similar constructs on their own in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Modern astrology, as it was practiced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and as it is practiced even today by the majority of western astrologers in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, was not the result of a linear development and refinement of the subject over the centuries which culminated in the form that it is in today. This is one of the great myths surrounding modern astrological practice. Rather, modern western astrology is largely the result of a handful of influential astrologers who inherited a few fragments of the astrological tradition and then created a new construct around it which was then infused with their own religious, ethical and theoretical speculations. Although recognizable in some of its basic technical principles, this system is actually quite different than any system of astrology that was practiced in the various ancient traditions of the past, both technically and in its theoretical and philosophical approach.

This discrepancy between the modern and ancient traditions of astrology became apparent to a handful of astrologers in the 1980's who began to investigate and publish works on the older traditions of astrology. In America this initial line of inquiry first came forth with the publication of Robert Zoller's work *The Arabic Parts in Astrology* in 1980, which was primarily influenced by the medieval tradition of astrology, particularly the work of the 12<sup>th</sup> century astrologer Guido Bonatti.<sup>5</sup> In 1982 the astrologer, linguist and historian of astrology James Holden published a paper in the American Federation of Astrologers *Journal of Research* titled 'Ancient House Division'. In this paper, Holden, who reads Greek and Latin, was the first astrologer and historian of astrology in modern times to point out that the original method of house division in the Hellenistic tradition was actually whole sign houses, or the "sign-house" system as he called it.<sup>6</sup> Later in 1988 he published an English translation of Abu Ali al-Kayyat's *Book of Nativities*, a 9<sup>th</sup> century astrological text from the Arabic tradition which had been rendered into Latin in the middle ages.<sup>7</sup>

In the United Kingdom the post-modernist movement had its start with the rediscovery of the earliest English language manual on astrology, William Lilly's mid-17<sup>th</sup> century work *Christian Astrology*. Nick Campion argues in his article *The Traditional Revival in Modern Astrology: A Preliminary History* that

The origins of the traditional revival proper, as an influential movement in late twentieth-century astrology, lie in the UK, chiefly with Olivia Barclay.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Robert Zoller, *The Arabic Parts in Astrology*, Inner Traditions, 1980. Short translations and extracts from Bonatti's work were first published in Zoller's *Arabic Parts*, and then he later published some partial translations through Project Hindsight and then later through his own publishing companies. Bonatti's entire work was recently translated from the Latin into English and published in two volumes by Dr. Benjamin Dykes as *The Book of Astronomy*.

<sup>6</sup> James Holden, *Ancient House Division*, The American Federation of Astrologers Journal of Research, Vol. 1, No. 1, Tempe, AZ, August 1982, pp. 19-29.

<sup>7</sup> Abu 'Ali al-Khayyat, *The Judgement of Nativities*, trans. James Holden, American Federation of Astrologers, Tempe, AZ, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Campion, *The Traditional Revival in Modern Astrology: A Preliminary History*, The Astrology Quarterly, Volume 74, No. 1, Winter 2003.

The crucial event in the revival in Europe was the acquisition of a copy of William Lilly's *Christian Astrology* by Olivia Barclay in 1980, and her subsequent efforts to circulate it that led to its eventual republication in 1985. During the same period Geoffrey Cornelius and Maggie Hyde founded an organization called *The Company of Astrologers* in 1983 which took an active role in teaching and promoting a more traditional style of astrology that was derived partially from Lilly's work. Barclay eventually started a correspondence course which mainly focused on methods derived from Lilly, and this directly influenced many other astrologers such as Lee Lehman, Deborah Houlding, Anthony Louis, and John Frawley who would later go on to play significant roles in spurring the traditional revival across the west through their popularization of older or more 'traditional' techniques and methodologies.

Then, at an astrological conference in 1992, a meeting took place amongst a group of astrologers. In attendance were Robert Schmidt and his wife Ellen Black, Robert Hand, Robert Zoller, Nick Campion, Lee Lehman, and a number of others. The result of these meetings, which took place over dinner during several consecutive nights, was that a translation project was to be formed. This project would be carried out under the auspices of a publishing company founded by Schmidt and Black that had originally focused on the translation of ancient Greek mathematical texts in the 80's, and it would be directed towards the translation of the entire corpus of extant ancient astrological works in Greek, Latin and eventually many other languages. Schmidt had spent the past two decades studying Greek and Latin, and his training was primarily in philosophy and mathematics. He had become intrigued with astrology in the mid-80's due to his wife's interest with it, and he became aware of the wealth of texts available in Greek in 1989 during the process of compiling an astrological encyclopedia for his employer, Michael Erlewine, during a brief stint as an employee at Matrix Software. This was the birth of what would later become Project Hindsight, and the revival of Hellenistic astrology in the west.

The core of Project Hindsight was composed of Robert Schmidt, Robert Hand, and Robert Zoller. The three began producing translations of Greek and Latin texts which were sold to astrologers on a subscription basis. There was much excitement in the astrological community during the early phases of Project Hindsight, and the company itself was completely funded by the astrological community through sales of the translations, conferences, and donations. A core group of translations were produced in this period between 1992 and 1998 which make up the majority of what we have available to study from the Hellenistic tradition today. However, these were intended to be preliminary translations which would later be revised and published in a final definitive series once the translators had a better grasp on the subject matter at hand.

Unfortunately the group eventually split up during the course of the 90's, with Zoller leaving first in order to pursue his own translations of the Medieval texts outside of the project, and then eventually Hand leaving in 1998 whereupon he formed the Archive for the Retrieval of Historic Astrological Texts (ARHAT), which also focuses primarily on publishing translations of Medieval era texts. Project Hindsight continued on under Robert Schmidt, and the focus became directed more towards the Greek material. Demetra George began working closely with Schmidt in order to develop a course on Hellenistic astrology at Kepler College in 2001, and classes of students began immersing themselves in

the Hellenistic tradition for the first time in several hundred years. Through Schmidt's work under Project Hindsight the technical, theoretical and philosophical foundations of Hellenistic astrology began to be explored and became accessible to the astrological community, and without it the current revival of Hellenistic astrology would not have occurred.

At the present time the astrological community is still eagerly awaiting the release of the first volume of the final translation series of Hellenistic texts from Project Hindsight. The study of the history of astrology has become more widespread in the academic community, with many new research papers and critical editions being produced over the past few decades. The community was dealt a serious blow with the death of the famous historian of science David Pingree in 2005, who produced numerous critical editions of astrological texts and articles, although his work continues to set the standard for astrological scholarship both inside and outside of the astrological community. Several astrologers have joined the translation movement, and new translations of astrological texts from the Hellenistic, Medieval and Indian traditions are being released at a staggering rate, many of which have never been translated into English or any other modern language before.

Over 2,000 years have passed since Hellenistic astrology first began to flourish in the ancient world. Today the astrological community is in the midst of another one of its periodic translation movements, the likes of which have not been seen since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The goal of the current movement is nothing short of the complete recovery and revival of the ancient traditions of astrology. The original tradition of horoscopic astrology, Hellenistic astrology, is on the rise once again.