

INTRODUCTION



More than two thousand years have passed since Hellenistic astrology first began to be practiced in the ancient world. The origins of this system are mysterious, although we know that it emerged in the Hellenistic period sometime after the conquests of Alexander the Great, and that it reached the height of its popularity during the time of the Roman Empire. It is the type of astrology that was in use in the Mediterranean region when the gospels of the New Testament were written in the first century CE, and like Christianity, it has had an enduring impact on western culture over the past two millennia. Hellenistic astrology represents the origins and foundations of western astrology, since most of the basic techniques and precepts that astrologers still take for granted today can be traced back to this period. The purpose of this book, then, is to provide an overview of the original tradition of western astrology.

Since the time of the Roman Empire, astrology has passed through many different cultures and languages. In some ways, there are many similarities between Hellenistic astrology and modern astrology. In particular, the fourfold system of interpreting astrological charts that incorporates the planets, signs of the zodiac, aspects, and the twelve houses first made its appearance in the Hellenistic era around the first century BCE, and this approach still very much characterizes the core of western astrology today. As we will see, many of the meanings and qualities that modern astrologers ascribe to different components in astrological charts were first defined by astrologers who lived around the first century of the common era. The advantage of looking back into the origins of some of these concepts is that it can help astrologers to understand where these techniques came from, how they were first developed, and in some instances, how they can be used more effectively today.

Despite these similarities, Hellenistic astrology is in many important respects quite different from the type of mainstream modern astrology that is practiced today. Some of these differences have to do with the transmission of astrology over the past two thousand years, and the changes that would occur each time the system was translated from one language to another. Each time astrology was transmitted, it changed, and some new concepts were added, while others were lost. Translation is an imperfect art, and it was made even more complicated prior to modern times by the fact that books had to be copied by hand, and sometimes only a few texts from earlier traditions would be available in any era. Part of the purpose of the modern revival of Hellenistic astrology is to bypass the past several hundred years of the accumulated astrological tradition and look back directly at the earliest versions of western astrology through an analysis of the surviving textual tradition. Often what one finds is that instead of the system appearing to be less complex or less refined, it is the opposite; we discover many important and powerful techniques that were lost in transmission over the centuries. While this does not negate some of the important developments that have taken place in the more recent astrological traditions, it does force us to abandon the assumption that contemporary astrology is the result of a linear development of the subject that has culminated in the form that it is in today. A recurring theme among astrologers who have taken part in the revival of Hellenistic astrology over the past two decades is the realization that some things were lost in the transmission that we didn't even know were missing, and in some instances, these are techniques that can do things that we didn't even think were possible.

The purpose of this book is to provide an overview of the history, philosophy, and techniques of Hellenistic astrology. Since this is one of the first works of its kind in modern times, I felt the need to attempt to write something that could provide a broad foundation for future studies. While the size and scope of this book may convey the pretense that it is a fully comprehensive work on the subject, in reality it is only an introduction to a vast field; there are many facets of the tradition that I will either have to omit entirely or only give the briefest of treatments. It is thus a starting point for future studies, and it is meant to initiate the reader into the subject so that they can independently engage some of the earliest source texts of the tradition. By providing a guide that will help orient and contextualize readings, my hope is to spur further interest in the study of the subject in general, and to make some of the research that has already been done up to this point more accessible.

My primary intended audience is astrologers who are interested in learning about the practice of Hellenistic astrology, although I hope that those who

specialize in the study of ancient history or philosophy will find something of value here as well. One of the tensions that I had when writing the practical sections of this book was between the desire to write a purely historical survey of how Hellenistic astrology was practiced back then, versus the desire to write an instructional manual on how some of the techniques can be used by contemporary astrologers today, based on my experience in using them over the past decade. It is always a potential liability when a practitioner writes a work that deals with topics ordinarily studied in an academic historical context; however, I believe that my perspective as a practicing astrologer can also be an asset in some instances because it allows me to engage the material with an earnestness that might be lacking if I did not think that the material had any practical value or validity. I have attempted to balance the tensions between my role as a historian and my role as an astrologer as much as possible, and while I may alternate between emphasizing historical or practical concerns at different points, I have tried to be very careful about noting when I am speaking about certain techniques from the perspective of my own experience. In most instances in the practical sections, my goal is simply to demonstrate how many of the techniques work when you apply them in contemporary practice as the ancient texts instruct, and I think in most instances my faithfulness to the textual tradition will be evident. Ultimately, my primary goal as an astrologer is to revive a tradition of astrology that has been dead for centuries and reconnect contemporary astrologers with it; indeed, the extent to which a person can understand and practice an authentic form of Hellenistic astrology in modern times will be the primary litmus test for the success of this book.

Having said that, one point that I should acknowledge from the outset is that reviving the practice of Hellenistic astrology requires quite a lot of reconstruction. Only a relatively small number of ancient astrological texts have survived into modern times, and many of these are damaged or fragmentary. No single text outlines everything, and they often use technical terms that are not clearly defined, and only rarely demonstrated. Sometimes we can compare how different authors use the same term or technique, and then develop a better understanding of it based on the areas where they agree, while other times these comparisons highlight disparities in the tradition where different authors will use the same concept in different ways. There is a remarkable level of both coherency and diversity in the surviving texts, and for this reason I will alternate between referring to Hellenistic astrology as a system and as a tradition. This is because in some instances, we are reconstructing a lost system that many different astrologers shared in common, while in other cases we are simply documenting the different ways that a long tradition of astrology was

practiced by a diverse group of people over several centuries. It is important to recognize both the areas of consistency as well as the areas of diversity, and not to overemphasize one or the other.

This is why some understanding of the historical backdrop of the tradition is necessary in order to recover the techniques, because it provides crucial information about who was using which methods, and there is a long process of textual analysis that must be undertaken before any conclusions can be drawn about the practice. Fortunately, the groundwork for many of these studies was laid by philologists and other academic historians over the past century. It is only in the past twenty years or so that some people in the astrological community have started to explore this material. What distinguishes this book is that it is one of the first studies on the subject written for a general audience of astrologers in modern times. While part of our goal is to revive the practice of Hellenistic astrology, it must be acknowledged that we have an incomplete picture, and as such whatever we create will partially be shaped by the limited number of texts that we have at our disposal, as well as by our interpretations of those texts. In some instances, those who research Hellenistic astrology and attempt to reconstruct its practice will come to different conclusions about what the original texts said or meant, and sometimes this will result in variant approaches to Hellenistic astrology in modern times. This is a natural part of the process of the transmission and revival of the older traditions, and it is a process that many other generations of astrologers have gone through previously, over the past several thousand years. While we may not be able to perfectly recreate what the practice of Hellenistic astrology once was, we can certainly come close. As long as we try to do so with the utmost care and consideration, we will be successful in genuinely reconnecting the ancient traditions with the modern ones, even if only in part. My goal here is to present, to the best of my understanding, both (1) a narrative that describes what Hellenistic astrology was, where it came from, and how it was practiced; and (2) a demonstration of how it can be used again today.

This book assumes that the reader already has some basic familiarity with modern astrology, although since part of the purpose is to explore the fundamentals of western astrology, my hope is that it could also act as a reasonably useful introduction to the subject of astrology as a whole. Part of the excitement surrounding Hellenistic astrology over the past twenty years has been the instances where it either represents a radical departure from modern astrology, or where it gives insight into the origins and conceptual motivation underlying techniques that astrologers have long taken for granted. There are many techniques that astrologers use today, and yet they don't really know where

they came from, how they were developed, or what the original conceptual motivation was for why certain things mean what they are supposed to mean. In Hellenistic astrology we find the answers to many of these questions, although sometimes in the process it requires a radical revisioning of how one practices astrology. Sometimes this involves unlearning concepts that one has previously learned and taken for granted as a contemporary practitioner of astrology. While this can be a difficult or disorienting process for some astrologers, the benefit is that it can result in a vastly improved ability to interpret astrological charts. Of course, for those who read this book without any presumptions about what astrology is or how it works, some of these points may not be as striking; however, you will be in the enviable position of having a clean slate to work from without having to unlearn various premises that others take for granted. Either way, our approach here will be to go straight to the heart of the original foundations of all of the major concepts in the earliest traditions of western astrology.

Another one of the challenges in reviving Hellenistic astrology in modern times is that there are many different technical terms in Greek and Latin that we don't have equivalents for in modern astrology. This sometimes necessitates the introduction of new terms in English to use in contemporary discussions about those ancient techniques. In other instances, there may already be a term that is used in modern astrology that is related to an ancient concept, and we have a choice between using the modern term or coming up with a brand new one. This has been an area of uncertainty over the past few decades, with some translators opting to introduce a completely new technical vocabulary for nearly every concept in Hellenistic astrology, in order to fully convey all of the subtleties and nuances of the original language; however, this sometimes occurs at the expense of the readability for modern audiences. Other translators have simply adopted modern terminology whenever possible in order to make the ancient texts easier to understand, although in some instances this has obscured the original meaning underlying the texts, when the modern terms do not accurately convey the original concepts. I have tried to adopt a middle ground approach between these two extremes by introducing new technical terms when necessary, but using modern equivalents when I feel that the meaning is sufficiently close. My general rule of thumb is that unless introducing a new term would make a notable improvement in the understanding of the concept, it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel.

That being said, from the perspective of a modern astrologer, there are still going to be a lot of new technical terms that one will have to learn in studying Hellenistic astrology, and there are a number of extended discussions about why I have proposed or chosen one word or another in order to represent

certain concepts. Since part of the purpose of this book is to bring Hellenistic astrology into the mainstream of contemporary astrological practice, I have attempted to balance word choices that convey the meaning of the original Greek term with those that sound familiar (rather than foreign) to practicing astrologers. A lot of very thoughtful work on issues surrounding the terminology in Hellenistic astrology has already been carried out by Robert Schmidt, and in many instances I have adopted translation conventions that he first introduced. However, in some areas I have disagreed with Schmidt's conventions and introduced my own, and while I have some concern about having multiple terms floating around for the same concept, I trust that this is something the astrological community will eventually resolve on its own as these techniques become commonplace in contemporary practice.

Part of the thesis of this book is that, at its core, Hellenistic astrology was originally designed as a complex system that uses celestial phenomena in order to study an individual's fate. This includes information not just about a person's character or psyche, but also about the concrete external circumstances and events that take place during the course of their life. What is fascinating about this is not only that someone in the ancient world would attempt to do something as incredible as design a system for studying fate, but that they were successful, and that the system actually works. The first few chapters of this book deal with the history surrounding how the system was developed, the time period in which it was practiced, and the astrologers who are our primary sources for recovering it. This is followed by a chapter on some philosophical issues that are relevant to the practice of ancient astrology, including a discussion about the role of fate and its conceptualization in ancient astrological practice. I then give an extended overview of the basic concepts of astrology, focusing on the fourfold system of planets, signs, aspects, and houses. This section is capped off by a long and somewhat complicated essay on the origins of the different approaches to house division, which is necessary due to some ongoing debates about the subject in modern times. Afterwards we move into a discussion about intermediate techniques for interpreting birth charts and synthesizing different placements, which allow us to articulate some of the most distinctive features of an individual's life. Finally, towards the end of the book, we will discuss some basic and advanced timing techniques—known in the Hellenistic tradition as time-lord systems—for determining when events that are indicated in the birth chart will occur in a person's life.

In the technical chapters, I present a number of example charts in order to demonstrate how the different techniques work in practice. I've tried to use a blend of contemporary charts belonging to eminent individuals

as well as personal charts from my own private files. While there are pros and cons for using either category, my approach here is in keeping with the Hellenistic practice of including both notable and non-notable nativities in the instructional manuals. To that end, I have tried to pattern my presentation of the example charts after the way they are presented in some of the ancient manuals, especially that of the second-century astrologer Vettius Valens and the instructional texts that he wrote for his students. The purpose of this is to demonstrate not just how the techniques work, but also to partially recreate how they are presented in the ancient instructional manuals, thus providing another preparatory step towards reading the texts on their own. While this can sometimes seem cumbersome compared to modern approaches, my hope is that it will help to create a more authentic and immersive experience.

One of the most striking realizations that people have when they begin to study the textbooks of the ancient astrologers is that life is still surprisingly similar now to how it was back then. Many of the core concerns that people have about their lives today are fundamentally the same, and this is part of the reason why a system that was created more than two thousand years ago for studying the lives of individuals can still be useful now. In point of fact, there is something about the system of astrology created during the Hellenistic period that was so compelling in its ability to clearly articulate the fundamental facets of human life, that parts of it have survived for two millennia. Although only part of this system made it into modern times, it is now possible to revive the rest of it and thus reunite the ancient and modern traditions. By looking back into the past, we can create a better astrology for the future.