

INTRODUCTION

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Astrology is a substantial and accepted feature of popular culture and of the esoteric and spiritual milieus of the contemporary world. It is also a potent modern form of cultural astronomy, an application of our understanding of the stars and planets to questions of culture, and of our understanding of our place in the universe.¹

Over the three thousand years or so of its recorded history, astrology's uses include describing individual character, diagnosing and curing disease, answering precise questions on daily matters, finding the most auspicious times for launching new enterprises, managing social affairs, providing high-level political advice, constructing sacred calendars, and taking care of the soul. It finds expression in the arts, architecture, religion and politics. It interprets the past, manages the present and predicts the future, sometimes in detail, sometimes in terms of general possibilities. It is situational in that it situates affairs on Earth within the wider environment, including the sky, and it is contextual in that it locates human life within a context provided by the stars and planets, whether they are seen as signs or influences, powers in themselves, agents of the divine, or indications of a deep, cosmic order of which we all are part. It presumes a universe in which all things are entangled, or to use a modern term, interconnected. That life on Earth is interconnected with the wider universe is why, astrology claims, it is possible to read one pattern in another, and to read the pattern of human life in the patterns formed by the planets. It is a hermeneutic, approaching the sky as a text, in the same way as scholars analyse literary forms. As Francesca Rochberg said of Babylonian astrology, the stars constitute a kind of 'heavenly writing'.² It carries into modern culture key characteristics of what we know as indigenous thought, including a respect for the unity of all things and a regard for cyclical time.

Astrology is found in some form in every human culture. The origins of the modern western tradition lie deep within the astral religion of ancient Mesopotamia of the third and second millennia BCE, from where it spread

to adjacent regions, changing its form as it went, adapting to Hinduism and Buddhism in India, Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy in classical Greece, and Islam in the Arabic-speaking world. In Christian Europe, it assumed a pervasive influence over almost every activity and aspect of thought, from its revival in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, until the social and intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century. By the late 1600s the casting of horoscopes, astrology's most sophisticated technical form on which most of its applications were based, had all but died out in Europe. From then astrology flourished for a hundred or more years as a feature of printed almanacs, the mass media of popular culture. A fresh wave of interest and activity was underway by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, encouraged largely by new forms of spiritual activity (as represented mainly by the Theosophical Society and its introduction of Indian cosmologies into the western world), and psychology (as represented chiefly by C. G. Jung). It offered a new theory of the self, or, rather, it updated an ancient theory of the self, in which the individual psyche is connected with the greater environment as represented by planetary patterns. Modern astrologers became less preoccupied with prediction and the details of the external world, and more concerned with self-understanding and with altering the future rather than forecasting it. There was also some interest in astrology as a science, whether in the traditional meaning of the word as a discipline with its own rules, or the modern meaning as demonstrably accurate and susceptible to statistical verification.

This new wave of modern western astrology initially flourished chiefly in Germany, France, Britain and the USA. It emphasised newness and innovation both in terms of the technical basis of horoscope reading, and its quest for new ways of establishing personal meaning in a universe which was now known to be incomprehensibly huge. It was at one with the quest for the new which characterised modernism in the arts. It developed its own institutional framework of schools and societies, along with journals and teaching manuals. A new popular vehicle was created in the form of the twelve-sign horoscope or, sometimes, 'star' column, which became a standard feature of popular newspapers and women's magazines by the 1920s. Those parts of the 1960s counter-culture which were concerned with the inner life brought a fresh wave of students and practitioners. From the 1980s technology began to play a more important role, with software which calculated horoscopes in a few seconds replacing the formerly laborious process. By the 2010s social media enabled any member of the public to access the kind of astrological information previously only available from a professional, and allowed any professional to establish a global clientele.

In general, histories of astrology deal with the ancient and medieval worlds and the Renaissance, and astrology's role in modern culture tends to be overlooked. This book is not the first academic publication to explore modern astrology. Two volumes of the *Journal of Religion, Nature and Culture* have already done so. Volume 1 no 2 (2007) was edited by Michael York, past director of the Sophia Centre, and Volume 7 no 4 (2013) was edited by Darrelyn Gunzburg, a Sophia Centre tutor. Other papers are scattered through *Culture and Cosmos* and previous Sophia Centre volumes. However, this is the first peer-reviewed book to focus on modern astrology. All the chapters are based on work conducted through and associated with the Sophia Centre, and delivered as lectures at the Centre's annual postgraduate conferences.

The book opens with three foundational chapters on the ancient and medieval worlds: Akindynos Kaniamos explores astrology as a means of engagement with the divine in late Roman philosophy; M. A. Rashed examines astrological themes in Islamic apocalyptic belief; and Chris Mitchell investigates the importation of astrology from the Islamic world into medieval England. We then move into the modern period with two chapters on the relationship between astrology and history. Karine Dilanian investigates the Russian cosmist Alexander Chizhevsky's theories of the influence of the sunspot cycle on history, along with his debt to Johannes Kepler. Jennifer Zahrt explores the seminal importance of Aby Warburg, founder of the Warburg Institute, in the study of the history of astrology. Three chapters then examine approaches to the soul and psyche in the twentieth century English-speaking world and the respective influences of classical thought, Indian philosophy and modern psychology: Alina Pelteacu on the classical theory of the daimon, Jayne Logan on theories of karma and reincarnation, and Laura Andrikopoulos on the development of astrology as a form of personality analysis. Turning to the mass media and popular culture, Kim Farnell sheds new light on the origin of the modern horoscope column, locating its origins earlier than the previously accepted foundation date of 1930. Lastly, two chapters deal with conceptual issues: Crystal Eves considers the implications of the common definition of astrology as a language and Garry Phillipson discusses panpsychism, exploring the implications of astrological claims for consciousness, and what theories of consciousness might mean for our understanding of astrological claims.

We have called the volume *Skylights*. The notion of skylight is obvious – the stars and planets are points of light in the sky. But why the plural? Modern scholarship has established that concepts of 'religion', 'society' or 'science' are not monolithic entities. Instead, they are complex, sometimes contradictory, and ultimately difficult to define. This is why we may, for example, now talk

about ‘histories’ rather than ‘history’. This is not a comment on whether there is such a thing as ‘truth’ or not, or objective as opposed to subjective knowledge, but is a recognition that, as we explore the subtleties, nuances and richness of human culture, there are no straight lines and no simple answers. Previous volumes in the Sophia Centre Press series of Studies in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology were therefore titled *Cosmologies* and *Astrologies*.³ It is in this spirit that *Skylights* continues our exploration of astrology’s diverse nature and role in human culture.

A note on the cover image

Joan Miró painted *L'étoile matinale* in Varengeville-sur-Mer in Normandy on 16 March 1940. The painting is number 6 in his series titled ‘Constellations’, which he painted partly as a response to the crisis at the beginning of the Second World War. Renee Riese Hubert wrote of no 16 in the series, ‘Vers l’arc en ciel’ (‘Towards the Rainbow’),

‘the network resembles a fragment of sky seen through a magnifying glass. The star-clustered bouquet grows on fertile nocturnal fields. Blossoms will never tarnish and cut flowers reach for a new bed among the stars ... astronomical or perhaps astrological maps and contours, erotic shapes and constant metamorphoses as well as the musical transcriptions of so many creatures are finally welded together’.⁴

Notes

¹ Nicholas Campion, ‘Astrology as Cultural Astronomy’, in Clive Ruggles, ed., *Handbook of Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2013), pp 103-116.

² Francesca Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy, and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³ Nicholas Campion, *Cosmologies: Proceedings of the seventh Sophia Centre Conference*, (Lampeter: Sophia Centre Press, 2010); Nicholas Campion and Liz Greene, eds., *Astrologies: Plurality and Diversity* (Lampeter: Sophia Centre Press, 2nd edition 2017 [2010]).

⁴ Renee Riese Hubert, ‘Miró and Breton’, *Yale French Studies*, no. 31, Yale University Press, 1964, pp. 52-59 (p. 54).