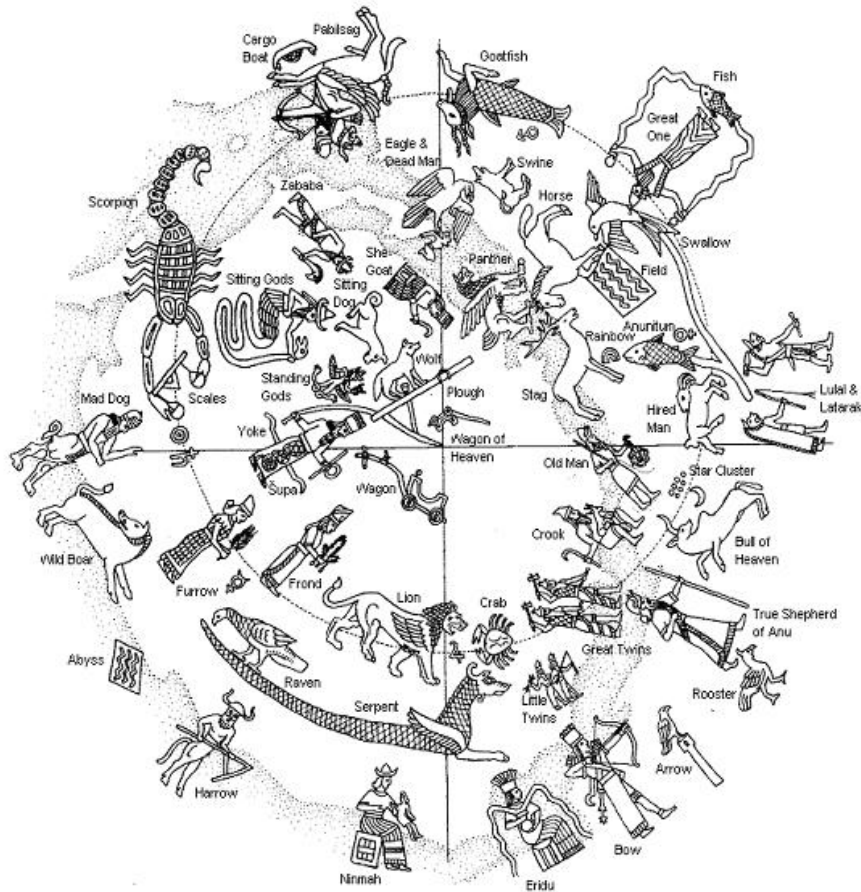


## Babylonia and Egypt



Babylonian star map, reconstructed by Gavin White

Western astrology seems to have been initiated or first developed in Babylonia. It had considerable development in the Hellenistic era. Babylonia is taken here to be roughly synonymous with Chaldea and Mesopotamia, and to include lands in which at various times Sumerians, Akkadians, Assyrians and Iraqis have lived in Hellenistic times.

In his *De Divinatione*, finished about 45 B.C, Cicero said that he was aware of no people, no matter how learned or how ignorant, who don't think that signs are given of future events, and that certain people can recognize these signs and foretell events before they occur. The Assyrians inhabited vast plains, he said, and had unobstructed views of the heavens. Certain of them recorded observations of the paths and movements of the stars, and informed persons of their significance. By means of long-continued observations of the constellations, the Chaldeans among them, said Cicero, are thought to have perfected a science which enables them to foretell what any person's lot will be and for what fate he was born.

On the other hand, Pliny wrote in his *Natural History* in 77 A.D. (translation of 1855): “All over the world, in all places, and at all times, Fortune is the only God whom every one invokes; she alone is spoken of, she alone is accused and is supposed to be guilty; she alone is in our thoughts, is praised and blamed, and is loaded with reproaches wavering as she is, conceived by the generality of mankind to be blind, wandering, inconstant, uncertain, variable, and often favoring the unworthy. To her are referred all our losses and all our gains, and in casting up the accounts of mortals she alone balances the two pages of our sheet. We are so much in the power of chance, that chance itself is considered as a god, and the existence of God becomes doubtful. But there are others who reject this principle and assign events to the influence of the stars, and to the laws of our nativity. They suppose that God, once for all, issues his decrees and never afterwards interferes. This opinion is beginning to gain ground, and both the learned and unlearned vulgar are falling into it.”

Egypt, and especially Alexandria, was a renowned center for astrological and astronomical studies in the Hellenistic era. In a narrow sense, the Hellenistic period ran roughly from the time of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.) to the 1st century B.C., when the Romans under Augustus conquered Egypt in 30 B.C. This conquest culminated in the battle of Actium at which the forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra were defeated by the forces of Octavian. Others make the Hellenistic era run from the time of Alexander the Great to the end of the ancient world, sometimes taken to be marked by the victory of Christianity in the 4th century A.D., the age of Constantine the Great. Cicero claimed in *De Divinatione* that the Chaldean art of the Babylonians was believed to have been acquired by Egyptians “through a remote past extending over almost countless ages”.



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The first extant horoscope for an individual has been said to date from some time in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. It appears that personal astrology, requiring the casting of individual horoscopes, developed later than omen astrology, prediction of events involving kings and kingdoms. Personal astrology was based on investigation of planetary positions, including the sun and moon, at the time of birth or conception, and seems to have been founded on a thoroughly deterministic conception of the cosmos. Side by side with it flourished catarchic astrology, which only assumed non-fatalistic influences, at least on enterprises like travel, marriage and business. The two kinds of astrology, fatalistic and non-fatalistic, have conflicting bases. Either stars exert an immutable or merely an avoidable influence on affairs. However, this distinction might not have been clearly made by individual users of astrology. Moreover, it's not inconsistent to believe that stars exert an immutable influence on some affairs and not on others, nor even to believe that stars exert mutable influences.

Although the origin of Western omen astrology is usually attributed to the ancient Babylonians, some have regarded astrology as having arisen in Egypt during the Hellenistic era. The originators of personal astrology may have been Greeks living in Egypt, rather than native Egyptians. Wilhelm and Hans Georg Gundel, in their *Astrologumena, Die astrologische Literatur in der Antike und*

*ihre Geschichte* (1966), presented indications of the Egyptian origin of personal astrology in Hellenistic texts,. These occurred in numerous writings in the collection called the *Hermetica*, in other writings in a handbook attributed to King Nechepso (reigned 677-672 B.C) and his high priest Petosiris, and in other sources.

In their omen astrology the Babylonians might base a prediction on whether or not such and such a planet was visible at some position in the sky, located by means of a nearby constellation. However, according to the Gundels, there appears to have been nothing corresponding to a systematic interpretation of the positions of the planets (including the sun and moon) in a zodiac, part of a system for locating the positions of planets as they wander through the stars.

Otto Neugebauer writes in *A History of Ancient Mathematical Astronomy* (1975, Part Two): "Before the fifth century B.C. celestial *omina* probably did not include predictions for individuals based on planetary positions in the signs of the zodiac and on their mutual configurations. In this latest and most significant modification, astrology became known to the Greeks in the Hellenistic period. But with the exception of some typical Mesopotamian relics the doctrine was changed in Greek hands to a universal system in which form alone it could spread all over the world. Hence astrology in the modern sense of the term, with its vastly expanded set of methods, is a truly Greek creation, in many respects parallel to the development of Christian theology a few centuries later."