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[Steven Birchfield](#) is a thoughtful and articulate astrologer, who has investigated the ancient sources of the cosmic science. He has developed a comprehensive understanding of the traditional bases of astrology and has put his knowledge into a series of articles that we will be presenting on Astrology on the Web over coming months.

An astrologer with over 30 years experience in astrological practice and social services, Steven is now studying for his PhD and a diploma in Mediaeval Astrology. He tells us he has resided in Africa, Asia, East and Western Europe.

Contact Steven at [stebi@online.no](mailto:stebi@online.no)  
You might also like to check out his website: [Divine Astrology](#).

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## An Introduction to Hellenistic Astrology *getting back to the source*

*What are the sources and origins of Astrology? Can we gain useful knowledge and perhaps decide some of the persistent questions that have dogged modern Western Astrology? Astrologer and philosopher Steven Birchfield looks at these issues in this, the first of a series on Hellenistic Astrology.*

When I began studying Astrology many years ago, I started from our most popular form for it today, "Sun Sign Astrology". The first book I purchased was [Linda Goodman's Sun Signs](#). As I read about Scorpio, I saw of course that I had many things in common. Yet, there was a bit of a rebel side to my nature that could not just accept that I was exactly the same as another 8% of the world's population! That is the equivalent of three hundred and twenty MILLION people! Were we all exactly as Linda Goodman described? My experience with others of my sign said, NO! What was it that then made us "kindred" but different?

These questions were the beginning of my "investigative" growth stage. (You will notice of course, that I avoid the use of the word "evolution" here. In the strictest sense of the word and theory it is the acceptance that one species changes into another. An Astrologer is not another species, although there are many who might argue that point with me). Not knowing where to begin my investigations, I turned to a novelty bookshop and purchased my first "Astrology" book. It was a reprint of *The New Waite's Compendium of Natal Astrology* by Colin Evans [out of print - Ed.]. In its pages, I discovered, much to my satisfaction, that there was more to Astrology than just being born on a certain day of the year. In order to cast a "true" Horoscope it was needful to also have the time of day. To my astonishment there was needed a certain level of mathematical and astronomical understanding! Terms like ecliptic, celestial equator, right ascension, sidereal time, mean time, true solar time, latitude and declination; now these were things into which I could sink my figurative teeth. So began to unfold the world of Houses and aspects, planetary rulers and dispositors. There were elements and qualities, planets moving direct and those, which moved, retrograde. How exciting my newfound world was!

Well as with every "silver lining" there was lurking, in the background, a "dark cloud", I just as quickly found that there was a certain amount of serious disagreement between Astrologers. This is no new phenomenon either. Vettius Valens, a 2nd century C.E. Greek astrologer recounts to us:

*"And since in the quarrel over the general teachings of the divisions, some made use of them in relation to the concomitants of the bounds, others in relation to the minor periods, others in relation to the twelfth-parts which are assembled from 10 years and 9 months, others in relation to the exaltations, while the subdivisions of these signified events, which were false. And so then, we spent much time wretchedly, and while distressfully making changes of place, mixing with those who are zealous about such matters."*<sup>[1]</sup>

As you can see, our astrological forebears suffered as much from the same human intrigues as us today. In fact, we find a fairly substantial rift exists today between the various approaches and practices. There seems to have been a distinct polarisation into two camps.


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In the modern camp are the Uranians, Humanistic, Esoteric, Archetypal and Psychological approaches. In the Traditional camp are those that practice Electional, Horary, Medieval, Mundane, Hellenistic and Vedic. Since the mid-nineties, more and more ancient texts have been translated and revealed. Unfortunately the division seems to be growing wider and wider. No truer words have proven themselves so accurately throughout history, "A house divided cannot stand!" The question that has plagued me most is, where does one find then, the necessary continuity that yields a solid foundation in the practice.



[Aquarius, the Water Bearer](#)



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This has been the motivation for my quest back through the ages. To study and learn from the experience of those that have formed astrology, who shaped it to what we have today. To follow the winds and twists and rediscover those threads of continuity that is missing today.



### What is so special about Hellenistic Astrology?

This is the question most are probably asking and is more to the point of this introduction. In order to answer properly however requires a closer examination of our astrological history. When starting my investigations I have to honestly admit that I was in no wise prepared for the enormous amount of historical and philosophical evidence I was to have to examine. It is a record that would and does in fact fill several volumes of books. My recapitulation here of the historical record is therefore going to be much abbreviated. <sup>[2]</sup>

I am not going to dwell in depth on the astrology before the Hellenistic period. The reason being that Astrology as we know it today, where we fix an Ascendant <sup>[3]</sup> point and divide the Zodiacal circle for the purposes of analysing (natal horoscope astrology), answering of questions, picking favourable times for doing things, etc, was not in existence prior to this period.

This fact alone makes the Hellenistic period unique and worthy of closer examination. Before this period, Astrology was oracular in nature. That is to say that the fixed stars, constellations and planets, as well as the natural phenomena associated to them (eclipses for example), were examined and interpreted as giving signs and omens concerning physical events. Those plying the Astrologer's trade were interested in the state of the King and kingdom and there was nothing "personal" about it.

However, the most noteworthy consideration about the Hellenistic period is the transformation that occurred through the synthesis of the Persian and Chaldean astrology, with Egyptian religion and astronomy, and the Greek Natural philosophy. This single event would appear to be the catalyst, which changed the oracular to the very personal. While I use the term event, I use it rather loosely here. In the "time-line" of history, it fills a rather large period from about 800 - 100 B.C.E. As you can see it did not "happen over night".

### The Pre-Hellenistic Advent: 800 - 400 B.C.E.

The political and cultural events leading into the Hellenistic period were very instrumental in setting the stage for the transformation that was to unfold.

Assyria had established a "world" dominion by 730 B.C.E. They controlled all of Mesopotamia and most of Persia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. While it is politically correct to say that Assyria governed, it was however Babylonian culture that pervaded the entire kingdom and for the first time, there was a free "cultural" flow between the subject territories. Up to this point, there were distinct differences in astrological, astronomical and philosophical culture, one line moving from the Babylonians, One from the Persians and one from the Egyptians. As it was the first time that Egypt, Babylonia and Persia were under the same political system, one has to recognise the importance of these great cultures meeting. In 612 B.C.E, the Babylonians once again regained regional domination only to be shortly thereafter subjugated by Persia. This was an important time in the mixing of these three main astrology lines, Persian, Babylonian and Egyptian.



Another important ingredient to the cultural "stew" that was brewing was the Semitic influence and the monotheistic religious teachings. When the New Babylonian Empire took the reigns of control, one of their first conquests was the overthrow of Jerusalem and the captivity of Israel.

*"In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it.*

*And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God: which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god."*

*"And the king communed with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: therefore stood they before the king. And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm.*

*And Daniel continued even unto the first year of king Cyrus."*

*"Then the king made Daniel a great man, and gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief of the governors over all the wise men of Babylon.*

*Then Daniel requested of the king, and he set Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, over the affairs of the province of Babylon: but Daniel sat in the gate of the king."<sup>[4]</sup>*

One wonders just what kind of influence Daniel and his friends had as "governors over all the wise men". It is interesting to note that it is in this time period that the first Zodiac appears in Babylon as we know it today, divided into twelve 30° segments. It is clear from the Bible that Daniel's influence extended into the reign of Cyrus the Persian <sup>[5]</sup>.

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