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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 Medieval Astrology. He tells us he has resided in Africa, Asia, East and Western Europe.

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 You might also like to check out his website: [Divine Astrology](#)

## Hellenistic Astrology

### The Living Signs

#### part 1: introducing the Zoidia

*The broad river of Modern Western Astrology has evolved over the centuries, incorporating a variety of tributaries, from sources as diverse as the Babylonians, the Egyptians, Greeks, Indians and Arabs. Steven Birchfield, an astrologer and philosopher, has been writing a series for us on Hellenistic Astrology, the underlying basis of our system. This section begins his fascinating exploration of the Living Signs...*

This essay has been a rather ambitious project I've been working on for several months and it appears it may be a while longer before it is completely finished. However I wanted to begin publishing it in the individual parts as I feel comfortable with the results. So what is now available is pretty much finished and as I finish the other sections I will be including them.

I wanted to discuss the 'Signs' on perhaps a little different level in this essay. We are all used to seeing a lot of interpretations of the 'Sun in the Signs' or the Moon or the other planets in the Signs. You don't hear much about the signs themselves. In fact it is pretty consistent that when the 'signs' are discussed as a subject themselves, we find the traditional descriptions most prevalent where their elemental nature, mode of action, physical attributes, etc. are described. A very typical example of this is [Lilly's teachings of the signs](#), which are quite consistent with and well preserving of the earlier tradition.

There is another side however that appears with remarkable consistency throughout the major early writers, a side that has perhaps fallen off a bit into obscurity and ambiguity. In order to understand this side we will have to go back a ways in our astrological history and try to regain just what the early Hellenistic astrologers meant when they used the term we call 'signs'.

#### The Zoidia

The word we use today to relate to the constellations that make up our zodiac really falls short of the original Greek meaning. We call them 'signs' and if you say 'sign' to the average person, they have conjured in their minds things like billboards, or something physical or even a gesture that is used to convey an idea or message. The hearing impaired use a 'sign language' and when they are communicating to one another it is called 'signing'. Our English word originates from the Latin word *signum* and besides it's normal connotation it also has a secondary meaning of 'image' like in artwork, or a statue or picture. But most people when looking at a beautiful Rembrandt don't stand and gush, "oh what a beautiful sign", do they? As a matter of fact in our English language the only time we refer to a picture when using the word sign is when we speak of the constellations and the pictures and images associated with them. And in this sense of 'image' then the word is an approximate equivalent to the Greek word *Zoidion*, which also has a sense of the meaning of 'image'.

The only way I can really explain it is to break down the Greek word *zoidion*. *Zoidion* is formed from the root word *zoion*. *Zoe* meant 'life' and the *ion* was used as a locative and/or a diminutive (that means it placed the root somewhere and/or gave a definition of size). Thus a *zoion* was a 'place for life' and/or a 'little life'. We preserve the sense of this in our saying that "the body is the seat of the soul" or "the temple of the spirit". The Greeks were famous for their temples, such as the Olympion, which was the dwelling place for the divinity of the Olympian Zeus. That however does not make the definition any simpler.

Perhaps if we catalogue the uses of this word we find in Greek literature we can come to a better understanding. Robert Schmidt in the *Translators Preface* of the 1st book of Valens *Anthology* takes the time to catalogue for us many of the references to the word *zoion* found in Greek literature.



Zeus with Ganymede

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- In Plato's *Epinomis*, the Athenian stranger defines for us that a *zoion* results "whenever a single copulative union of soul and body should give birth to a single shape" [981 a 7-9]
- A little further in the same dialogue, the gods, who are likewise characterised as *zoia*, are identified with the stars. The stars are "either the gods themselves, or else images [*zoia*] of the gods created by the gods themselves." [983 e 5-6]
- In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates characterises paintings [*zoia*] as the "offspring of the painter's art that stand before one as though alive." [275 d 5]

In all of these usages there is the clear inference that the *zoia* in each case, result from something 'higher' and more 'real'.

*"A picture is not a zoion-image because it is an image of some subject or some scene. It is an image because it reflects or 'images' the artist's soul – or at least something that exists in the artist's soul."*

Taken to another level,

*"...in Plato's Timaeus, the Demiurge creates the world itself as a zoion, a living being. But this living being is also created in the image of the 'Idea of a Living Being'. This is not so much an abstraction of thought as it is a more fully real prototype of all living things!"* [1]

Not only in Greek philosophy do we find this concept, but also if we examine closely in the Bible a human life is a *zoion*! It is the result of a copulative union of soul and flesh. "So God created man in his own image [a *zoion*], in the image of God created he him; male and female" [Genesis 2:27]. In other words we could just as well regard human life as the "offspring of the painter's art that stand before one as though alive"

It is doubtful then that the Greeks would only consider the picture or image character of the "signs" of the zodiac as just mere human projections of men and animals into the sky. But rather they were living images; they were divine artwork, the creations of a 'higher' source which, had a 'life' of their own.

In certain quarters of modern astrology we find a re-awakening of this concept, and none so clearly as in Jungian Archetypal astrology.

*"I dare say that we shall one day discover in astrology a good deal of knowledge that has been intuitively projected into the heavens. For instance, it appears that the signs of the zodiac are character pictures, in other words libido symbols which depict the typical qualities of the libido at a given moment."*

– Carl Jung in a personal letter to Freud

In simpler terms, the creation of the [libido](#) symbols [*zoia*] is the result of the psychic energy of the 'collective unconsciousness' being projected into the heavens. A good friend and colleague, Anthony Peña related to me that,

*"Nothing could have been further from Jung's thought [vis. The mere human projections of men and animals into the sky] in regard to living, active symbols of the unconscious. Whenever Jung discusses the concept of "psychological projections" – it has significantly more import, serious intent, and "meaning" than the average person will allow for. With Jung, "projections" of the psyche are never taken "lightly" and/or treated as a matter of "just" imagination and/or "just" psychological projections. For Jung, "projection" was a natural function of psyche that served as a vehicle into the very depths of the soul and into the healing of the soul."*

Now it is interesting from both these perspectives of virtually the same idea that the Greeks could not clearly define this 'higher reality' any more than Jung could define his "unconscious".

*"Fate, what the Greeks called Moira, . . . takes as its province what is generally regarded as contingent or accidental – matters that were excluded from serious philosophical consideration by the Athenian philosophers themselves as being ultimately unintelligible."* [2]

*"...the Self is a borderline concept, which I call a symbol because it expresses something we cannot express otherwise, because we simply don't understand it. The idea of the Self is really unknown ground. The psychological definition is that the Self is the totality of consciousness and unconsciousness, and that sounds pretty definite, we seem to know what consciousness is and to have a fairly clear idea about the unconscious. But to say we know the unconscious is going too far; we only know of it... A concept that contains a definite factor like consciousness and an indefinite factor like unconsciousness is not scientific... it is metaphysical in its nature per definition: it overreaches itself."* [3]

I think however I will leave the philosophical controversies that exist between these areas of thought for another time and another place. The main purpose of this essay is to emphasise the living quality of the *zoidia*, which is the relevant part of this discussion regardless of whether one leans toward the modern or classical.

Much of the significance of the *zoidia*, [I will use the word *zoidia* or *zoidion* in place of 'sign' throughout the rest of this text], has slowly diminished and been relegated to a place, like an inanimate building, to where they are only domiciles like a house with descriptive qualities that are totally void of life and define only to the extent that we might say a house has a certain shape to its roof or the windows are so and so big and that it keeps the weather off your head. It is only the shell for another force, which is the actual life within the house, the planets. But I cannot believe for one moment that it was possible for the earlier astrologers to have used this language without being ever conscious of the deeper significance presented in the word, *zoidion*. And if one examines closely the written record from Valens to Al-Biruni, one will discover an underlying concept, which while unspoken, is certainly visible in the type of astrology and approaches to actual usage.

## A Cosmic Eco-system

In recent years we have been made increasingly aware of the system of balances that exist in our environment: global warming, deforestation, pollution and the slow death of our oceans and water masses have awakened in us the need to understand just how interactive each level of life is on the total environment. From the lowliest plankton to the highest in the food chain there is an intricate 'life-role' played out.

The apostle Paul was probably well versed in the Greek philosophy concerning this intricate working of each level and the 'life-roles' in nature, as he relates this idea when he writes,

*"And there are differences of administrations [roles or ministries], but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations... For the body is not one member but many... And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body... much more, those members of the body which seem to be more feeble, are necessary."*

I Corinthians 12 KJV

In like manner, our early forbearers understood that each part of the zodiac was a 'life-role' played out; each different and each necessary. We've seen the creation was a *zoidion*, the stars were *zoia*, and the signs were *zoidia*. And just as our environment is the product of the quality of each level of 'life' so is the individual a product of the quality of each level of 'life' found in the individual zodiac.

This is the point of this essay, to regain a proper perspective of the level of 'life' represented by the *zoidia*: to take them from an inactive and perhaps a bit neglected significance and put them back in their proper place in the Cosmic eco-system. I'm sorry to "wax philosophically" here but in order to understand what the Greeks meant; you have to understand this quality of the *zoidia*. The *zoidia* had a 'life' of their own and as such they could and do have relations with each other. And because the signs were the domiciles of the planets (who were also *zoia*) then the planets could have a relationship and dealings with each other. Al Biruni illustrates this relationship when he says,

*"Whenever two planets are in signs which are in aspect to each other, they [the planets] also are said to be in aspect;"* [emphasis is mine – SB] <sup>[4]</sup>

We find within this statement an inference of inter-dependence that because of this, what I will call, 'living' familiarity between the *zoidia* then there exists a 'living' familiarity between the planets. In fact in several authors, including Ptolemy, there are great pains taken and several chapters devoted before all else, to the 'living' qualities of the *zoidia*.

In the following pages of this essay then, I am going to, as best I can, re-acquaint the awareness of you the reader, with the qualities of the 'Living Signs': the *Zoidia*.

▶ The next part of *The Living Signs* examines the concept of aspects and the idea of the signs "casting a glance" at each other. Read part two of [The Living Signs](#).

[Click here for Steven Birchfield's excellent Introduction to [Hellenistic Astrology](#)]

### References:

<sup>[1]</sup> General Note by Robert Schmidt in preface to Valens *Anthology* Book I © 1993 Robert Schmidt, and published by The Golden Hind Press. See pages xvi – xix.

<sup>[2]</sup> ["The Facets of Fate: The Rationale Underlying the Hellenistic System of Houses"](#) — by Robert Schmidt

<sup>[3]</sup> Carl Jung — *"Nietzsche's Zarathustra"* p. 413–4v

<sup>[4]</sup> ¶259, ¶446 of Al-Biruni's *"The Book of Instruction in the Elements of the Art of Astrology"* — Translation by R. Ramsay Wright 1934 — Published by Ascella.



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