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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.

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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

*In this the second part of his illuminating article, Stephen Birchfield continues his investigation of the origins and development of Western Astrology and the useful methods that were introduced during the Hellenistic Period.*

Equally interesting is the fact that several birth charts were found written in cuneiform, the oldest being dated to the late Persian period April 29, 410 B.C.E. <sup>[6]</sup>, which had no degrees given, only sign positions, and no Ascending degree. Rob Hand further tells us that:

*"Various ancient sources mention "Chaldeans" who cast birth charts for various persons, including Diogenes Laertius who said that according to Aristotle, a Chaldean forecast Socrates' death from his birth chart, and that Euripides' father also had his son's chart read getting a forecast of his brilliant career. The reference to Chaldeans of course refers to astrologers and makes it clear that the art in this period was completely associated with late Babylonians, i.e., Chaldeans."* <sup>[7]</sup>

This, among the many subtle changes developing in astrology, was particularly significant. Why is that? Simply, this event brings to our attention the beginnings of the emphasis of the "individual". Since all the oriental cultures were "collective" oriented, where should we look to find the source of this change of emphasis? For that answer, I think we have to investigate what was happening outside of the dominant world power.

In this same period of 800–400 B.C.E. was developing the philosophical and "scientific" groundwork in Greece. Ancient Greeks such as Homer<sup>[8]</sup> and Hesiod<sup>[9]</sup> had already built a "national" mythology, but it was the Milesians Thales<sup>[10]</sup>, Anaximander<sup>[11]</sup>, and Anaximenes<sup>[12]</sup> as well as Heraclitus<sup>[13]</sup>, who sought to give a quasi-scientific explanation of the world. While not "scientists" or mathematicians, they laid a foundation for all future philosophical and scientific investigation by describing in natural philosophical terms the creation and the stars' influence. Those that followed, followed the precedence that they had set. To list, in this introduction, all the major actors and their contributions would be an immense work and perhaps detract from its intention. The most significant to name here are Socrates<sup>[14]</sup>, Plato<sup>[15]</sup>, Pythagoras<sup>[16]</sup>, Hippocrates<sup>[17]</sup> and Aristotle<sup>[18]</sup>.

The Greeks at this point had become the philosophical and "scientific" centre of the known world and their cosmology of causality and emphasis on the "individual" became the subjects of prime interest. The schools and academies established in Greece attracted the "wise men" and scholars from far and wide within the now Persian empire. Simultaneously many of these same Greek philosophers travelled widely carrying these new schools of thought to both

Egypt and Babylon.

### The Hellenistic Period

We have seen above that at least by Aristotle's time, ca. 350 B.C.E., there were the beginnings of natal astrology. However, it is also interesting to note that up to this time we find no


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Greek astrology or astrologers! Any references to astrologers were simply the "Chaldeans". So where does the astrology of the Hellenistic period, (or what is commonly called Hellenistic Astrology), come from? What then are the origins of "horoscope" astrology?

In 331 B.C.E the political picture changed as Alexander the Great gathered the Persian Empire under Greek domination. Egypt, Palestine, Persia, Mesopotamia and parts of northwest India all fell as conquests and for the first time in history the different cultures were united under a common language. Greek was not only the official language, but was used for any purpose involving communications between the diverse ethnic cultures. A scholar or traveller could go anywhere, from Greece in the west, to India in the east, and Egypt in the south and be

understood. Interestingly enough, it was not Athens which became the centre of culture for this new empire as one would think. It was Alexandria in Egypt that became one of the most famous of the Hellenistic capitals. While the residents of Alexandria retained some of their Egyptian culture, it became mixed with that of the Greeks, Romans, Macedonians, Persians, Syrians, Jewish, and Chaldeans. It was somewhere here, amongst the intellectual mélange of third century BCE Alexandria, that very simple natal or judicial astrology made a quantum leap to a highly sophisticated and complex system of astrological methodology.

Quite honestly, the period from 300–100 B.C.E. is a mystery. There exist no known texts or manuscripts from this period, but there do exist several varying opinions as to just where this system of horoscope interpretation came from. Some theorise it was the result of a continuous tradition from Mesopotamia, transmitted by Babylonian diviners such as Berossus <sup>[19]</sup> to the Greeks. Robert Schmidt presents us with the opinion that it was a unique Greek invention as a theoretical construct by one man or a small school. The Hermetic traditionalists insist it came out of the secret oral Egyptian temple system. Others propose it was the creative synthesis by scholars of all three cultures: Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Greek. Unless some long forgotten text is uncovered, we may never know.

We do know that they did exist, although indirectly, through the writings of the "third" generation astrologers in Greece, the "novi". The second century CE astrologer Vettius Valens reports to us:

*"The most amazing Abraham in his books on this subject has given us the explanation of others as well as his own..."* <sup>[20]</sup> *"For in the 13th book, after the proemium and the disposition of the zoidia, the King attacks the Lot of Fortune from the Sun..."* <sup>[21]</sup> (referring to the text of Nechepso <sup>[22]</sup>) *"For him who wishes to ascertain the matter of happiness more exactly, I will return to the Lot of Fortune which is the most necessary and sovereign place, as the king mysteriously explained, beginning in the 13th book..."* (referring to the text of Nechepso) *"Petosiris" <sup>[23]</sup> also explained the matter similarly in the 'Boundaries'...' "* <sup>[24]</sup>

Therefore, it is clear from Valens' texts that he derived his teachings from an even earlier textbook. Just how much earlier, we do not know. It is "guestimated" that Nechepso and Petosiris were writing somewhere between 300–200 B.C.E. and Abraham we have no other reference to [but see note <sup>[22]</sup> - ed.]. Another "mystical" figure from this same period is one called Hermes Trismegistus <sup>[25]</sup>. His writings are widely repeated among a large percent of the earliest Greek astrologers. It is a shame that we have not been able to retrieve any texts from this very important period. Nevertheless, some things are quite evident, the most important being that in the 5th century B.C.E. we have the most rudimentary of natal astrology. Then, by the time of the earliest recorded astrological authors ca. 100 B.C.E., we have a very complete natal astrology. Robert Schmidt best sums up these events for us:

*"There is a statement by a Neo-Platonist philosopher named Iamblichus in a strange book called On The Mysteries. In this book, another neo-Platonist, Porphyry (of Porphyry house fame, for the astrologers here) is directing a number of questions about the Egyptian religion to an Egyptian priest. In the course of the answering of these questions, the priest says that the men who translated the Egyptian sacred writings into Greek - and these sacred writings included their magical, alchemical, and astrological writings, all generally attributed to one of their sages named Hermes - the men who translated these sacred writings into Greek were men who were trained in Greek philosophy, presumably the philosophies of the Athenian Greeks, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics.*

*Now, this is a very astonishing statement and it made a great impression on me. If we take it seriously (it is several hundred years after the fact), it means that in Hellenistic astrology we may have an absolutely unique event, something that had probably never happened before and has not happened since. We may have a*



[Aquarius, the Water Bearer](#)



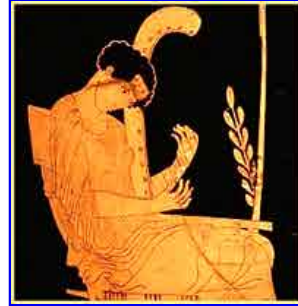
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*deliberate and unprecedented fusion of what we might call the straight Athenian philosophical tradition and the esoteric traditions of the Middle East."* <sup>[26]</sup>

The Hellenistic period is unique in the history of astrology. In less than 200 years, an astrology developed that changed the whole nature of its earlier Oracular history.

### Conclusion

It is not a forgone conclusion that Hellenistic astrology's uniqueness makes it better or the most reliable method. Its "rediscovery" however has introduced us once again to techniques discarded or lost due to perhaps errors in its transmission or misunderstanding of underlying principles. As I speak seven languages, I understand completely the problems in translation. The difficulties are compounded when one language "ideology" is foreign to another. Astrological history is replete with translations of translations. Egyptian texts were translated to Greek, which were later translated to Arabic, which were again later translated to Latin with several hundred years between translations. You played the game as children I am sure, where you sat in a circle and one person whispered something in his neighbour's ear and it went around the circle each whispering in his neighbour's ear what he "understood" he heard. Often times the results were quite comical. It illustrates quite effectively that the further away from the source one gets, the more chance there is for the distortion of that source. Add to that the element of translation, and you have a reasonable chance for distortion of information.



Therefore, it is the intention of this astrologer to introduce, in subsequent articles in this series, the techniques and philosophy discarded, misunderstood or lost to us over the 2000+ years since their inception. I hope that you will come back and join me in re-discovering the threads of continuity that have made astrology one of the most lasting concepts in mankind's history.

This ends the main part of this article, but you might also enjoy [part three of Introduction to Hellenistic Astrology](#), which contains valuable additional notes and references.

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