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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 4: Sign aspect – Planetary aspect: The Separation of Church and State

In the fourth part of this fascinating series, Steven Birchfield, astrologer and philosopher, continues his exploration of Hellenistic Astrology, the underlying basis of our system. Here he examines the concept of aspects between zoidia and aspects between planets. What are we to make of the idea that there is a natural activity of planets and a natural activity of zoidia? Read on and decide for yourself.

This noticeable difference of aspects between the *zoidia* and aspects between the planets raises another question: that of the power of the aspects. For example, just what is the power of the opposition? Olympiodorus who was a commentator of Paulus' work says:

"And in the same way also, the seven stars, if they should be unconnected with one another, they are most evil...But again one must consider this also, even if the stars are unconnected, whether they are actually in like-engirdling or equally ascending zoidia. For thus the evil is moderated."^[39]

Here we have explained to us that 'the power of the opposition' found in the equally ascending *zoidia* of Gemini and Capricorn for example, moderates any evil as a result of their being inconjunct.

There are a couple of possibilities I can think of which may explain why this is so:

1. We are speaking 'relatively'. The Inconjunct was the worse that could happen, so an opposition was preferable to that, like the lesser of two evils. It at least brought the planet back into the workings of the whole chart.
2. The concept perhaps is closer to the Arabic model, where Abu Ma'shar calls the inconjunct relation of Gemini-Capricorn for example, as being a 'natural opposition' because it is closest to being an opposition in nature, so that the equally-ascending signs are in fact moderating an opposition as they do the square aspect between the like-ascending signs of Taurus and Aquarius.^[40] Or,
3. There is something more to the opposition between *zoidia* than just merely being 'inimical' as it is called.

The first proposition is an obvious one and of course true in the sense that it is better to find all the planets active and participating. Although one might argue that an opposition brings just as many problems and maybe it would have been better not to create new ones.

I question the reasoning of the second proposition as presented by Al-Biruni quoting Abu Ma'shar. *Zoidia* that are equally ascending and 'like in course' as he calls them, are based on the relationship of inverse degrees. If one were to look at the angle between 1° Aries and 29° Virgo, then yes they are almost 180°. Just as valid though, if you look at the angle between 1° Virgo and 29° Aries, they are closer to a trine. So who is to say that the inconjunct between these two *zoidia* isn't that of a 'natural trine'? The degrees in each sign in their natural order are always and at all points 150° from each other and therefore at all times inconjunct and neither a 'natural opposition' nor 'natural trine'. So I have the least amount of faith in this proposition.

This brings me to the third proposition. Are there really so many inconsistencies, or am I missing something? Is the opposition truly inimical or is it something else? To answer this, I think we have to go back to what this thesis is proposing; and that is that the *zoidia*, independent from the planets, have their own "life" in regards to each other and that the result of this life creates an environment for the planets to function in and produce their results. Two individual



Dionysus Riding Leopard

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'eco-systems' that are interdependent.

If you go back and examine the figures for the 'seeing and hearing' *zoidia* (figures 1,3,4) you'll find that all the figure descriptions are either sextile, trine or oppositions. They are all constructive and beneficial and every opposition is represented. In comparison looking at the figures which describe the mitigation of aversion (figures 5,6 and 7) you'll see these are the very difficult relations for the *zoidia* and they are all either inconjunct or squares. Perhaps then, these figure descriptions between the *zoidia*, are in fact truly representing what is beneficial and what is not between them, that the relationships they have to each other are inherently different than those the planets have to each other and that they have an effect on the 'life role' that the planets have amongst themselves.

I find some support for this in *Valens Anthology Book I*, where he is very careful to delineate the co-mixture of the planets separate from the *zoidia*. He tells us in chapter 20:

"For, I did not want to compile commixtures at great length and with many subdivisions. The synoptic manner, then, which is easily taken in at a glance from the natural activity of each star AND zoidion, will be preferred by those who can see." ^[41]

What is clear from Valens' statement is that there is a 'natural activity' of the stars [planets] and a 'natural activity' of the *zoidia*. These are two distinct activities, which are not necessarily the same.

Dorotheus of Sidon in his writings in *Carmen Astrologicum* also takes great pains to separate the aspects between planets and influence of the *zoidia*. He discusses each on its own terms and a look at the table of contents makes this very clear.

- Aspects of trines, If one of the planets aspects another from trine
- Quartile [aspect]
- On the planets aspect from opposition
- Aspect of the planets from sextile
- If Saturn is with one of the seven
- If Jupiter is with one of the seven

After explaining planetary aspects he then explains the importance of their placement in the *zoidia* in relation to the ascendant *zoidion*.

- Knowledge of the places of the planets
- Arrival of the Moon in the Places
- Arrival of the Sun in the Places
- Arrival of Saturn in the Places etc.

He then gets a little more specific and goes so far as to explain how each planet reacts in the different *zoidia* based on domicile.

- Arrival of Saturn in another's house
- Arrival of Jupiter in another's house
- Arrival of Mars in another's house
- He goes through each of the planets and ends: On the arrival of the planets, one of them in the house of another.

So I repeat, it certainly seems clear there was a separation of the natural actions of the planets from those of the *zoidia*.

So is an opposition between *zoidia* the same as the opposition between planets? I think perhaps this early separation of 'Church and State' if you will, does not make an opposition of *zoidia* necessarily inimical. It was usually an inimical planet, or a planet made inimical by position or astronomical circumstance, being posited in an opposing *zoidion* to its own domicile, exaltation or triplicity [detriment or fall] that highlighted the ill-effects of the opposition. Mars in Libra and Saturn in Virgo might illustrate an example of this. Since Mars is the lighter of the two, he is casting his aspect to Saturn. Saturn is in the 12th from Mars and since the aversion is mitigated being equally-ascending *zoidia*, then it is as if Mars in its detriment is in opposition to Saturn. Not a very promising aspect. However if Mars were in Virgo and Saturn in Libra, Mars is now casting his aspect forward to Saturn and, since Mars is on the right of Saturn, then this aversion becomes like a conjunction with Saturn in his exaltation. This becomes a totally different relationship and result. If instead of Mars, Venus was in Libra, then the 'mitigated aversion become opposition' would produce yet another result where the opposition has perhaps a more positive effective because of Venus' dignity in her domicile.

I wonder if the fact that the opposition falls among the figures that are helpful and have the greatest potential for effectivity is important. I think in some respects our more modern view of oppositions is perhaps more accurate. We may at times go to the other extreme in fact. What I understand is needed in all of this, is to separate the ideas of opposite *zoidia* from opposite planets. The truth I think lies in the synthesis of the 'natural activity' of the *zoidia* and that of the planets. Which is probably why the early astrologers taught each separately.

We've seen that the *zoidia* certainly had 'inimical' relations with each other. I think the square being found amongst the figures for inconjunct *zoidia* is indicative of just how hard a square can be. It's like two people looking at each other but not seeing each other because they are so far apart in ideology, or they can't see [are blind to] each other's point of view. So I would imagine that the squares that are not mitigated by equally-ascending *zoidia*, or like-engirdling *zoidia*, or *zoidia* of like course are extremely hard and among the worst kind of environments to function in along with the *zoidia* in aversion. ^[42]

I think this inference is not without precedence. Antiochus of Athens tells us,

"The zoidia, which have sympathy for one another in accordance with a square zodiacal side are these: Taurus to Aquarius, and Leo to Scorpio through equal ascensions. Again Leo to Taurus and Scorpio to Aquarius through equal power. And Gemini to Virgo and Sagittarius to Pisces through like-engirdling. All other squares happen to be useless for sympathy."^[43]

It appears to me then that of all the aspects, the opposition is extremely, 'case sensitive'. If we understand that an opposition by *zoidia* is not necessarily an evil in itself, but rather creates a sensitive environment for the planets to exist and function according to their natures in, then Paulus' statement makes a lot of sense. In fact I wonder if it is a 'misnomer' to say the aspects between *zoidia* are 'good' or 'bad'. It might be more correct to say that the environment produced by these aspects is more 'conducive to' or 'inimical to' creating a better environment or more difficult environment for planets to work in. To say then that the mitigation of aversion between *zoidia* is good and constructive is true in that the potential is there. The actuality with regards to the outcome in an individual is how the planets agree or disagree.

It is interesting in this regard to look at the interpretations of the planets in opposition to each other to see that in fact the opposition between *zoidia* only made something very potent, but it was not necessarily malefic of itself. If we take a couple of examples from Dorotheus, we can quickly see the difference.

"If Saturn aspects the Moon from opposition, it indicates the spoiling of his mother's property and pain and hidden illness and grief and irritation."

"If Jupiter aspects the Moon from opposition while the Moon is western [and] increasing in number [waxing]^[44] then he will be celebrated with respect to his livelihood, a famous man, and he will be one of those who relies on himself and will not obey another."^[45]

We can see a clear difference in the effects in these two examples. While the outcomes are totally different, one that is totally unprofitable and one that is profitable, what is common to both is the strength of the effect. In both there is a strong result. What is also common to both is that they are oppositions and the difference in outcome is because of the planets concerned. Dorotheus unfortunately does not give us a description of each planetary pair in opposition but mainly those that were malefic, those from Saturn and Mars and a selected few with the Moon. He does not give us those with Jupiter or Venus or Mercury or the Sun. It is clear however from those he gives us that what makes the opposition hard is the condition and nature of the aspecting planets. It is likewise clear from each example that the opposition is very strong in producing the effects from the planets.

Valens gives us a little more insight into oppositions when he says,

"But we did not comprehend the malefics in a diametrical positioning [opposition] to be harmful in every way for every nativity, but there are times when they are benefic (and especially for notable nivities), unless they are also confounded with many afflictions — And the diametrical positionings will be judged in accordance with both stars, one positioning whenever a star should be diametrical to a star while marking the hour, another whenever it should be diametrical in its own house or trigon or exaltation. And when the lords of the trigons or of the sects are opposing themselves, the natives will become the most afflicted and unstable in their livelihood."^[46] [Emphasis is mine – SB]

Valens simply tells us that you can't just judge an opposition because it's an opposition, but you have to judge an opposition "in accordance with both stars." One criterion is the positions in relation to the ascendant, and he gives the example of two planets in opposition where one is rising and the other setting. The next criterion he gives is if a planet, from one of his dignities, is opposing another. But he says one of the worst things is if the Triplicity rulers or the sect Lords, the Sun and Moon, should oppose their own domicile. So again I have to emphasise the different natures inherent in *zoidia* and those of the planets, and I also have to emphasise their interdependence. It wasn't all up to the planets as their positioning in the *zoidia* changed their condition and it wasn't all up to the *zoidia* either as the nature of the planets influenced their relationships with each other.

This is the end of part four of *The Living Signs*. The next chapter will be published on this site as it comes to hand. Return to the start of [The Living Signs](#).

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

Footnotes & References:

^[39] Chapter 3 of Olympiodorus' *On Paulus, Late Classical Astrology: Paulus Alexandrinus and Olympiodorus with the Scholia from Later Commentators* — Translation by Dorian Greenbaum — ARHAT Publications

^[40] ¶440 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

^[41] Bk I ch.20 — *The Anthology* of Vettius Valens, Translated by Robert Schmidt and published by Golden Hind Press

^[42] In the following table, the square sign pairs that are mitigated and those that are not are listed.

Mitigated	♈ - ♎	♈ - ♋	♁ - ♃	♁ - ♁	♁ - ♄	♁ - ♅	♁ - ♆
Unmitigated	♉ - ♊	♉ - ♌	♁ - ♆	♁ - ♅	♁ - ♄	♁ - ♃	♁ - ♋

[43] Chapter 17 of *Antiochus of Athens, The Thesaurus* — Translated by Robert Schmidt and published by Golden Hind Press

[44] These are the 'diurnal' conditions of the Moon and harmonise with the diurnal nature of Jupiter so benefic. – SB

[45] *Second Book of Dorotheus from the Stars on the Judgments Concerning Nativities* On the planets aspect from opposition. *Carmen Astrologicum* — translated by David Pingree and published by Ascella

[46] Book II chapter 41 — *The Anthology* of Vettius Valens, Translated by Robert Schmidt and published by Golden Hind Press




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