

# Understanding Planetary Dignity and Debility

## The Philosophy of Sign Rulership

... a planet or significator is in his own house represents a man in such a condition, as that he is Lord of his own house, estate and fortune; or a man wanting very little of the Goods of this world, or it tells you that the man is in a very happy state or condition...  
(William Lilly, CA., p101)

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Few astrologers would dispute the relevance of sign rulership - we base much of our art on its strengthening influence and judge the condition of the planets according to their

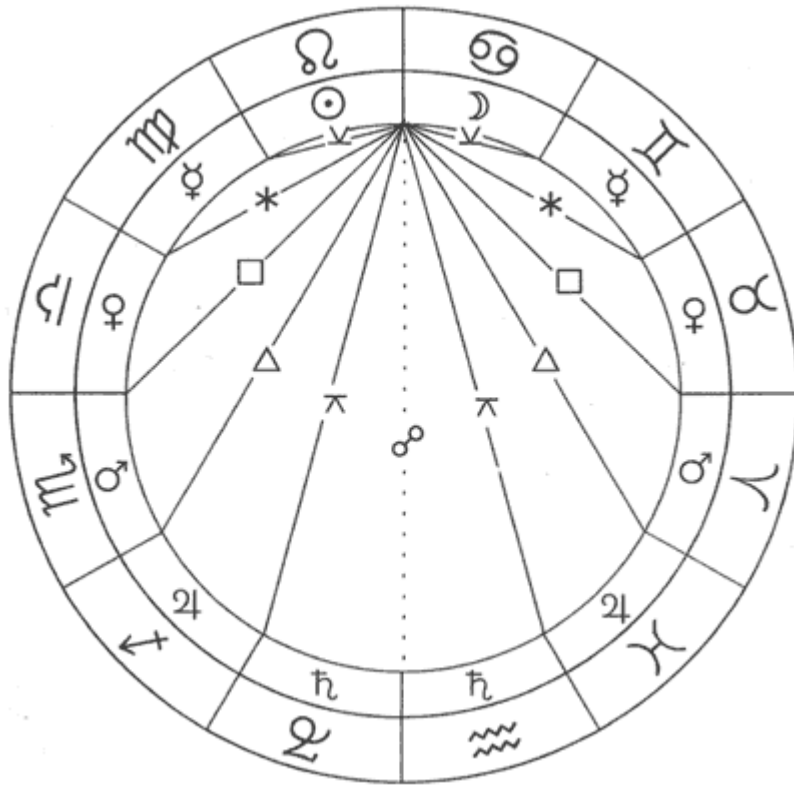
relationship with the signs. Ancient astrologers called the signs the 'houses of the planets', regarding them as planetary abodes. Although it is natural to assume that sign rulerships form the very essence of astrology, they have a limited history which, unlike planetary exaltations, cannot be traced to the Mesopotamian period. [1] We assume that their origin is classical, not only because of a lack of data from earlier times, but because the arrangement is based upon a planetary order which considers the length of their orbital periods (*i.e.*, - Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn), first introduced by the Greeks.

Curiously, planetary rulerships are absent from the *Astronomica* of Manilius - possibly due to a lacuna in the text, or the author's untimely death which left the work incomplete. [2] They are evident in the literary sources and charts of the 1st century BC, however, and were clearly an established part of astrology by that stage. [3]

In Book I of his *Tetrabiblos* Ptolemy gives a clear explanation of the reasons for the arrangement of sign rulerships, showing how they are based upon a symmetrical pattern that extends from the luminaries. As in most ancient symbolism, the pivotal point in the underlying philosophy is the relationship of the Sun to the Earth. Hence the distribution of planets to signs begins at the cusp between Cancer and Leo where the power of the Sun is greatest (at least in the northern hemisphere where astrology evolved).

Since the most productive of heat and warmth are Cancer and Leo, they assigned these to the greatest and most powerful heavenly bodies, the luminaries, as houses. Leo, which is masculine, to the Sun and Cancer, which is feminine, to the Moon. [4]

The five visible planets are then distributed between the ten remaining signs in such a way that each has a 'day house' in a masculine sign and a 'nocturnal house' in a feminine sign. (It is, of course, fitting that the luminaries rule only one sign each since the Sun loses its power in a feminine sign, just as the Moon loses its potency in masculine signs.)



The androgynous planet Mercury governs those signs - Gemini and Virgo - that adjoin the home of the masculine Sun and that of the feminine Moon, in keeping with its asexual nature. Ptolemy pointed out that Mercury is never further from the Sun than one sign in either direction so it is appropriate that the cusps of its signs preserve this relationship with the cusp of the sign of the Sun.

Following Mercury is Venus, the fertility goddess, governing signs which Ptolemy described as 'extremely fertile': Taurus and Libra. Venus is a benefic planet; the friendly sextile between the beginning of Leo and the cusps of her signs again preserve the astronomical relationship between Venus and the Sun by keeping them within the distance of two signs.

Next comes Mars, designated to Aries and Scorpio because, according to Ptolemy, they are agreeable to its destructive and inharmonious nature, and form a hostile square aspect to the 'houses' of the luminaries.

Jupiter, the 'Greater Benefic', governs the signs that form a harmonious trine aspect to the luminaries - Sagittarius and Pisces.

Saturn, the furthest visible planet from the Sun, is given rulership of the signs that are most distant from the Sun's 'home': Capricorn and Aquarius. These are the signs of the coldest, wintry weather, their unfriendly aspect to the signs of the luminaries befitting the destructive nature of the 'Greater Malefic'.

The association of planets to places of their own gender (or sect) was far more relevant in traditional astrology than it is today and formed an important part of evaluating planetary strength. Al-Biruni tells us that a masculine planet was dignified when positioned in a masculine sign and weakened in a feminine one, the former being known as *hayyiz* (or *hayz*), meaning 'natural place' or 'preferred position', the latter being known as contention. [5] Although the planets have two signs each, they are nonetheless more potent when located in the sign which corresponds to their own gender and temperament. Saturn is a masculine planet and thus prefers the sign of Aquarius to Capricorn. For the same reason Jupiter prefers Sagittarius to Pisces, and Mars prefers Aries to Scorpio. Venus is feminine and so prefers Taurus to Libra, while Mercury, although common to both genders, prefers Virgo to Gemini because it most closely maintains its natural relationship with the Sun.

Day Home (masculine)		Night Home (feminine)
♄	♁	
	♂	♋
♃	♀	♏
♋	♄	♈
♏	♀	♍
♈	♂	♌
♌	♃	♉

Shaded areas represent preferred positions

Signs of detriment are simply those which oppose signs of rulership. The Sun, for example, rules Leo and is detrimented in the opposite sign, Aquarius. Clearly, if a planet in its own sign is in its strongest, safest position, it is at its most vulnerable in the furthest sign from this point.