

PART II

TECHNICAL BASIS & THE INHERENT

DIFFICULTIES OF HOUSE DIVISION



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THE PROBLEM WITH HOUSES

Given the diversity of systems available, all astrologers face a dilemma in selecting which method of house division to adopt. Each system has its own merits, and it would be an impossible task to identify one as universally preferable since the question of which works best is sensitive to subjective reasoning, variations of interpretative style and geographical practicalities. Despite this, many astrologers have sought to establish that their chosen method is the ‘pure’ system to which others can be considered corruptions. Often this is based on an attempt to claim insight into the original system as verified in the work of Ptolemy – even though Ptolemy’s work suggests a personal disregard to the use of houses generally and within the *Tetrabiblos* they are barely mentioned. However, tracing the development of house construction from its earliest sources does offer an illuminating path through which we can monitor the recognition of inherent technical difficulties, and consider the subsequent attempts to resolve them in the alternative methods of calculation put forward.

Rather than yielding to the temptation of trying to find a consensus of agreement among ancient authors, a more honest approach is to admit the ambiguities and inconsistencies. Our understanding of house division in ancient times is currently clouded with confusion and assumptions, in which the philosophical perspective, astrological approach and general life-style of the astrologer is gravely underestimated. The importance of this is demonstrated with our earliest detailed source, the *Astronomica* of Marcus Manilius. Written around 10 AD and therefore predating Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos* by over a century, this is currently regarded as the oldest surviving reference from which the ancient philosophical approach to houses can be explored.

The houses as three-dimensional divisions of space

Authors who criticize the astronomical basis of the *Astronomica* often overlook the fact that the text was written in verse. The aim of Manilius was not to establish his talents as a scientist or even as a working astrologer, but principally as a poet. His quest was to ‘sing of the stars’, and this he accomplishes with passages of artistic splendour and great literary beauty. We should admit from this that the *Astronomica* is primarily useful as an overview of myth and symbolism, and derive from it that little, if any, of the astrological theory would be original to Manilius. That he managed to incorporate any of the technical basis of astrology in a work inspired by aestheticism is cause for small wonder.

Nonetheless, a careful study of his terminology has led scholars to conclude that, in talking of the houses, he refers to a method of division which encompasses the whole celestial sphere and not simply the region of the ecliptic.¹ This realization is important because later methods of house division attempt to apportion the houses as divisions of the zodiac (centred upon the ecliptic) rather than aiming to create an equal division of the whole of the local framework of the observer; and here we have an argument against suggestions that classical authors such as Valens, who appear to have mainly used whole sign houses, were working with the ‘original’ method.

Manilius claimed a precedent for introducing astrological lore to the classical world.² We may safely assume that he wasn’t concerned with originating knowledge but took pride in his role of being one of the first to relay the perspective of older civilisations to an unfamiliar audience. Certainly much of his work shows a close philosophical association with the observational approach of Mesopotamian divination. In this, the primary division of the sky began with the cardinal points and their demarcation of east, west, north and south. Interest in planetary activity was less constrained

1. A well researched article to this effect was written in 1989 by Prudence Jones and republished in *History and Astrology: Clio and Urania Confer*, (London: Mnemosyne Press, 1995). The reader is referred to that work for the full arguments.

to the belt of the ecliptic, and took account of all forms of celestial activity in the whole envelope of heaven, including lightning, clouds, the colours and shades of the sky and anything that was of an unusual appearance. Their point of reference in defining a meaning was the locality in the sphere and whether it was to the left, to the right, or high or low on the horizon. The use of ‘segments’ and ‘areas of meaning’ that fell under the rulership of specific gods is known to have a very long history in divinatory techniques, with evidence of its employment in the 2nd millennium BC being widespread in liver divination, the interpretation of the flight of birds, the design of the city and all forms of mystical knowledge.³ It is fair to suppose that it played a greater part in ancient astrology than the fragmentary evidence available to us is able to prove, though possibly not in a division of twelve until after the zodiac became established as the main framework of astronomical measurement. Manilius’s text gives us a good indication that the original concept of houses was based upon dividing the local celestial sphere (determined by the circles of the local horizon, local meridian and prime vertical) in a similar manner to how Babylonian priests quartered and then further divided their other tools of omen analysis.

The difficulties of finding a suitable house system that will work well in all locations are the legacy of our decision to make the zodiac – and hence the ecliptic – the central crux of the horoscopic scheme. This underpinning principle became firmly established during the classical period and is now so deeply embedded into the core of our art that any perspective but this appears irreconcilable.⁴ Still, the evidence points to houses evolving from an entirely separate foundation to that of the zodiac, with the intention of demonstrating a more complete yet entirely individual perspective of the heavens. The purpose of the zodiac is to map the secondary motion of a planet as it revolves in its superior orbit around the Earth, but the houses map the primary motion of a planet’s daily journey through our skies.

2. *Astronomica* I.v5: “I bring strange lore untold by any before me”.

3. See diagram ‘the division of sacred space’, page 3.

Their relationship with the observer is altogether more personal and direct, and through them the affect of a planet in the zodiac is grounded to reveal its specific influence upon any locality. To understand why difficulties arise in using the ecliptic to define local space, it is necessary to visualize the variability between the true cardinal directions and those represented by the ascendant and descendant.

Difficulties of ecliptic-based space division

As the Earth rotates on its axis from west to east, it appears from our apparently stationary viewpoint that the stars rise in the east, culminate on the upper meridian and set in the west. For an observer in the northern hemisphere the easiest way to observe the planets in the zodiacal belt is to stand facing south – one would then see the stars rising somewhere near the east on the left, culminating in the south ahead and setting towards the west on the right: this is the perspective that is represented on an astrological chart.⁵

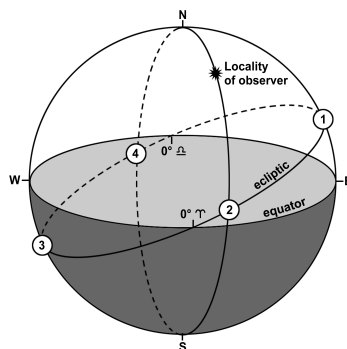
Since the Earth is a globe, an observer from any locality will always be at the centre of their own bowl of heaven, but in astrology the midheaven (MC) does not represent the point immediately overhead (our local zenith), but the point at which that meridian intersects with the ecliptic (see diagram below). The more northerly the latitude, the lower down on the horizon the midheaven point is likely to be, but it will always be the part of the zodiac that is due south at any time, indicating the point where the planets reach their

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4. Some very credible research into the 'Local Space' chart, based upon the altitude and azimuth as a geographically based astrological tool has proved very effective however, suggesting a modern approach which probably has close connections to ancient Mesopotamian methods. For further details see *AstroPhysical Directions*, by Michael Erlewine, (Ann Arbor, MI: Heart School of Astrology, 1977); *Astrolocality Astrology: A guide to what it is and how to use it* by Martin Davis, (Bournemouth, Wessex Astrologer, 1999), or the introductory article 'The Local Space Chart' by Sean Lovatt, published in the *Quarterly* of the Astrological Lodge of London, Vol. 62, no.4, 1992.
 5. The reverse is true in the southern hemisphere where the planets culminate due north.

highest declination in their arc between the ascendant and descendant. With the MC and IC then, there is true alignment between the astrological angles and the cardinal directions south and north. This is not usually the case with the ascendant and the east, or the descendant and the west.⁶

Because of the tilt between the Earth's equator and the ecliptic, the ascendant will only align with cardinal east at two moments during the day – namely when 0° Aries or 0° Libra (the points of intersection between the equator and ecliptic) are rising. At such times the midheaven will be close to a 90° angle to the ascendant for all locations. But when other parts of the ecliptic ascend there is a discrepancy from due east: the ascendant is most northerly when 0° Cancer rises and most southerly with 0° Capricorn rising. As a result, 90° as measured along the ecliptic does not necessarily reflect 90° in geometrical measurement, and there is a distorted angle between the ascendant and midheaven which becomes increasingly difficult to resolve with latitude. In the district of Alexandria in Egypt (31°N) and the areas where Hellenistic astrology evolved, the variation is

The celestial sphere of the observer



- 1 = Ascendant (north of east)
- 2 = Midheaven (due south)
- 3 = Descendant (south of west)
- 4 = Lower Midheaven (due north)

6. This role holds true for all locations outside of the tropics.

small and causes no real problems; but in high latitudes it becomes impossible for certain parts of the zodiac to rise at all. Of the signs that do rise, some linger on the ascendant for many hours while others speed by in a matter of minutes.

In the Arctic and Antarctic regions, the intrinsic problems can be illustrated through the phenomenon of the midnight Sun, which prevents any division of the chart into diurnal and nocturnal hemispheres. And though this is an extreme example, at the North Pole 0° Aries can rise on the ascendant and culminate on the midheaven simultaneously (a problem which causes most astrological software programs to present incorrect angles or default to equal house division). At such latitudes, ecliptic-based methods of house division are capable of offering a true reflection of the sky as it is cut by those methods, but the distorted divisions it offers are seen as a troublesome impracticality by many astrologers.⁷

The 'space-based' alternative

In view of these problems, there have been attempts to construct a method of house division which does not begin with the ascendant but from the true point of east. The most notable is the **Morinus System** which starts from the intersection of the equator with the meridian and horizon in the east and then divides the equator into twelve equal sections, with house cusps taken from where celestial longitude projects those points onto the ecliptic.

As a result the midheaven is always located 90° from the 1st house cusp, but the degree of the ascendant is not tied to the cusp of the first house and may fall in other houses. The system was invented by the French astrologer Jean-Baptiste Morin in the 17th century as a proposed solution for charts with high latitudes; but like any other that has attempted to disassociate the ascendant and 1st house, it has

7. For a full exploration of the problems of horoscopy at Polar regions, see Michael Wackford's article 'Placido and the Semi-Arc method of House Division' reproduced online at <http://www.skyscript.co.uk/placido.html> (accessed 21/02/06), or his detailed series of articles on this subject published in *Correlation* by the Astrological Association of Great Britain, vols 19-23, 2001-2005.

never gained popular favour. The obvious reason is that the ascendant and descendant have absorbed their own astrological significance which ties them into a natural association with the 1st and 7th houses. The act of rising and setting has played as much a part in dictating the meanings of these houses, as has their association with east and west.

It appears that it is simply not possible to reconstruct a system that corresponds to Manilius's perspective yet remains fully sympathetic to ecliptic-based measurement. It has also been suggested that Manilius's system was, in fact, an *idealised* framework of heaven, based upon the prime vertical which was probably assumed to equate with the ascendant. The fact that this was not always the case in his region was possibly overlooked or deliberately ignored in the way that Platonic philosophy favours the spiritual ideal over material reality. As astrologers we take a similar stance in concluding that from a philosophical point of view the ascendant is symbolic of east and therefore, astrologically, assumes its significance.

From such a perspective, the system that comes closest to that of Manilius, which may even have been the one to which he referred, is the **Campanus** system, because this also rejects a direct division of the ecliptic in favour of the prime vertical, the great circle which cuts the east and west points of the horizon and passes through the zenith and nadir at right-angles to the observer's meridian. This is divided into twelve equal sections with the corresponding intersection with the ecliptic taken as the house cusps. Although this system is attributed to Johannes Campanus, a prominent 13th century mathematician, it was used by Al-Biruni in the 11th century under the name 'the system of Hermes', suggesting a much earlier, unknown origin.

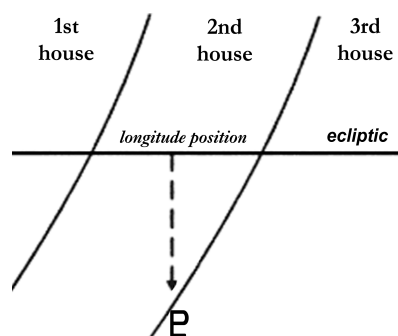
The point in favour of Campanus is that it readily lends itself to a three dimensional view of space by emphasizing the planet's position in relation to the horizon and meridian at the place of birth – hence there is a subtle shift of perspective in which the houses are not simply projected onto the zodiac, but rather the zodiac is viewed through the houses as determined by the local sphere. The point against it is that by undermining the role of the ecliptic, the symbolic connection of the Sun's orbit around the earth is weakened and some

would see this as a more fundamental origin to house meanings. A more practical disadvantage is that Campanus is also highly sensitive to distorted angles at extreme latitudes.

The latter problem is perhaps the main reason why Campanus has never been a real contender in universal house systems, but has always remained a popular choice for those who reject the most favoured methods. In 1985 it was claimed to be the most preferred system in England after Placidus⁸ and it was greatly endorsed by Dane Rudhyar who saw it as an ideal approach to ‘person-centered’ astrology because of the acknowledgement that it gave to ‘the space at the centre of which the individual stands’.⁹ Rudhyar also proposed that a future development of the houses could utilise Campanus as the basis of a three dimensional ‘birth sphere’, in which the effect of planetary latitude could be fully acknowledged; although such a development would also require an alternative way of representing this information than our two-dimensional chart forms which only show measurements along the ecliptic.

Those who consider the three dimensional perspective important argue that defining house positions by zodiacal degree alone can often prove inaccurate since it assumes that the house cusps cut through the ecliptic in a straight line whereas in reality the lines are curved, formed by great circles passing through the earth and meeting at the poles. This curvature results in an angle that moves several degrees across the ecliptic when latitude is considered. David McCann has illustrated how this distortion manifests in the chart of William Butler Yeats, for whom Pluto has a latitude of 15°S. The diagram below shows that by zodiacal degree alone Pluto appears to be in the middle of the 2nd house but when latitude is taken into account it is actually on the 3rd house cusp.¹⁰ Anyone seeking a

8. Colin Evans, *New Waite's Compendium of Natal Astrology*; revised by Gardner (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1985), p.47.
9. D. Rudhyar; *The Astrological Houses: The Spectrum of Individual Experience*, (CRCS Publications, Sebastopol, CA, 1972); Op. cit., p.26.
10. I am grateful to David McCann for allowing me to reconstruct his example, first published in ‘The Problem of Domification, Part 2’; the *AA Journal*, Vol 38, no.6, Nov-Dec: 1996, p.379.



house system that attempts to reconstruct a division of local space would see this as a major inconvenience, whilst those who prefer ecliptic-based systems may argue that the astrological significance of the cusps and houses are linked only to the degrees where the house cusps cut the ecliptic, and latitude is therefore irrelevant in this matter.

Another house system that is often compared to Campanus, and frequently claimed to be a development of it, is the **Regiomontanus** system, because it also utilizes a great circle other than the ecliptic as its main frame of reference. Regiomontanus is based upon an equal division of the equator rather than the prime vertical – it is the same method as that suggested by Morinus, but bows to convention by commencing from the ascendant. Although it found popularity later than Campanus, it is also known to have been used in the 11th century¹¹ and in all likelihood developed along principles entirely of its own. In emphasizing the equator, advocates claim that it pays a greater recognition to the Earth's daily rotation, rather than the movement of the Earth around the Sun as measured by the ecliptic. It also has the advantage of being less sensitive to house distortion in high latitudes than Campanus.

The system is named after the 15th century mathematician Johan Müller of Königsberg, (also known as Regiomontanus), who popularized its use at a time when rapidly developing printing

11. It is described by Abenmoat of Jaén, in a manuscript believed to have been owned by Regiomontanus. J.D. North, *Horoscopes and History*, (Warburg Institute, London, 1986), op.cit. pp.35-8.

techniques ensured that information required to support it was easily available. With a ready supply of tables it became the main European method for several centuries afterwards, and as the method employed by many prominent 17th century astrologers including William Lilly, it continues to be popular today, particularly amongst horary astrologers or advocates of traditional techniques.

Projected divisions: the focus on time

The Regiomontanus house system generally fell from favour in the 19th century when Placidian tables became more accessible. The **Placidus** system is named after the Italian Benedictine monk, Placidus de Titis (1603-1668), who popularized its use during the 17th century. Again, it is accepted that Placidus did not invent the method; tables were already available for it in 1604, a year after Placidus's birth, and it earlier appeared on an astrolabe in 1305.¹² The 12th century Hebrew astrologer Abraham Ibn Ezra acknowledged it as the system employed by Ptolemy, and Placidus appears to support this view within his work where he respectfully notes "I desire no guides but Ptolemy and reason".¹³

The Placidus system is time-based, in that every cusp marks the position that the degree on the ascendant would move to at a subsequent 'planetary hour'. (The 12th house cusp marks where the degree of the ascendant would be positioned two planetary hours after the chart was cast; the 11th house where it would be after 4 hours; the midheaven where it would be after 6 hours, and so on). Planetary hours are not the equal units of 60 minutes that are used in our civil calendar, but vary according to season so that the periods between sunrise and sunset are equally divided by 12 (see appendix B for more details). Thus the degree of the ascendant will progress up to the midheaven and through the diurnal hemisphere of the

12. Mike Wackford, 'Placido & the Semi-Arc Method of House Division'; *The Traditional Astrologer* magazine, (Ascella, Nottingham), Issue 7, Winter 1994, p.26.

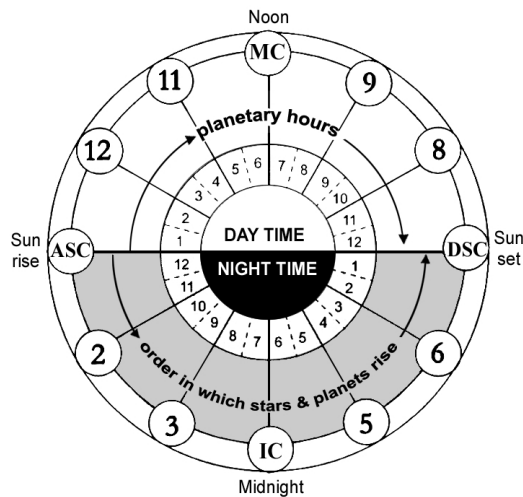
13. Placido de Titis, *Primum Mobile*, trans. John Cooper, London, 1814, op cit. p.47 facs. reprint (London, Institute For the Study of Cycles in World Affairs, 1983).

chart much more slowly in summer than it would in winter, whilst the degree of the descendant will speed quickly through the nocturnal hemisphere.

The perfect harmony between Placidus cusps and the traditional use of planetary hours, adds credence to the claim that this could have been an original method of house division, based upon the two-hourly ‘watches’ of ancient astrologers, who numbered the constellations in the order that the stars within them rose to the ascendant during the twelve watches of the 24-hour period. Jane Ridder-Patrick, in her *Handbook of Medical Astrology*, points out the ease of establishing the planetary hour using this method of division – since daytime planetary hours begin with the rising of the Sun on the ascendant we can establish the planetary hour of any chart simply by noting the house position of the Sun, with each hour identified by dividing each house in two.

There seems little doubt that the symbolism attached to the interpretative use of the houses has been greatly influenced from their use as ‘time-markers’, in which the movement of the planets’ passage through the heavens (following the diurnal arc) is recognized. And because its division follows the diurnal arc Placidus also lends itself to the most ‘natural’ system of Primary Directions endorsed by

Placidus House Division



Ptolemy, for which reason its advocates claim it as the system he would have preferred. We have to accept an element of speculation here – we have no conclusive evidence from Ptolemy’s work to endorse this view or suggest otherwise. Placidus does, however, remain the most popular quadrant system of house division in use today. It is often said that the reason for this is the ready availability of Raphael’s *Tables of Houses* which offer data to support the system, but this understates the value of its underlying philosophy which is also clearly to be respected.

Although Placidus division is simple in concept, the mathematical trigonometry behind it is complex, with cusp positions needing to account for the effect of latitude and adjusted by calculations based on the use of hour cycles. **Alcabitius** and **Koch** are systems that work along similar time-based projections, all of which involve associating the angles with the Ascendant and Midheaven and finding the intermediate cusps by dividing in three the time taken for the degree of the Ascendant to move to the Midheaven. The fundamental differences lie in the way these projections are related to the ecliptic: by use of hour circles, vertical circles, or projections of the Ascendant. Alcabitius, which uses vertical circles, bears the name of the 12th-century Arabian astrologer, Alchabitus, but it is unclear whether Placidus predates the Alcabitius system or vice versa. It is clear that those whose names have become celebrated as champions of techniques are not usually reliable indicators of their first invention.

The Koch system, however, is generally accepted as being of modern development, introduced in the 1960s by the German astrologer, Dr. Walter Koch. Tables supporting its use became available in 1971, and it is currently very popular in Europe, particularly with the Ebertin and Huber schools. Koch uses projection of the Ascendant to formulate the intermediate house cusps, and its followers argue that it is the only system to fully utilise the Ascendant as the primary connecting thread between the ecliptic and the place of birth in the calculation of every cusp.

In theory, there are valid philosophical arguments that allow every house system to be perceived as the most appropriate according to one's inclinations; in practice, once we move beyond understanding whether our preference is to emphasise time or space, most of us would find our ability to prove that one house system works much more persuasive than our ability to prove that another system doesn't.

Keeping it simple!

In his article, *An Astrological House Formulary*, Michael Munkasey provides step-by-step instructions on the mathematical techniques needed to formulate the various systems of division.¹⁴ This is an excellent guide that should allow anyone with enough interest to become capable of calculating cusps without relying on astrological software. One glance at this article will probably convince most astrologers that they don't wish to do so! For many of us, it will seem all too complicated to work with on a day-to-day basis. This leads to the argument that supports the simpler systems: with these at least working astrologers can feel in control of their own calculations and thus place confidence in the associated symbolism that arises from their chosen system.

Most of the other main house systems in popular use work upon the principle that since planetary activity centres upon the path of the Sun, the ecliptic does indeed provide the ideal focus for dividing the chart into 'spheres of activity'. The simplest approaches, the **equal-house** and **whole-sign methods**, merely require knowledge of the ascendant or ascending sign, and an equal division throughout the rest of the zodiac eliminates the need for any complicated calculations.¹⁵

14. Available on the NCGR website, (accessed 24/11/01)
<<http://geocosmic.org/HouseArticle.html>>

15. The equal house method takes the degree of the ascendant as the degree of each subsequent cusp (eg, an ascendant of 10° Cancer, would mean the 2nd house cusp is at 10° Leo, the 3rd house cusp is at 10° Virgo, etc.); for such a chart the whole sign method would associate the whole of Cancer with the whole of the 1st house; the whole of Leo with the 2nd house, and so on.

Until recently, such an approach was considered to have an element of naiveté attached to it – ideal for beginners, the unspoken implication was that astrologers with a more sophisticated grasp of trigonometry would eventually progress to a more complex method. Yet recent research into classical astrology has created a renewed interest in these simple techniques from a more scholarly perspective. The point of strength is that, regardless of the originating theory behind house division, in practice at least, classical astrologers tended to tie the houses to the signs, apparently concurring with Pelletier, who wrote in defence of the equal house method: “It seems superfluous to demand mathematical or astronomical precision of a frame of reference for houses which are purely symbolic”.¹⁶

The **Porphyry** house system is often seen as an ideal compromise here: it maintains the connection between the angles of the chart and the Ascendant and Midheaven, but it offers simplicity of technique that merely requires trisection of the ecliptic arc between the angles to calculate the intermediate cusps. There is, however, a great deal of confusion regarding how the houses were used in ancient times, and when quadrant systems such as Porphyry and Placidus were introduced. Passages which were once thought to demonstrate the equal-house method in practice are now taken to be more evident of the use of Porphyry or the whole-sign system; this creates some doubt about whether the equal-house system has any theoretical basis in classical astrology at all, except as a compromise by astrologers who were attempting to align the houses with the angles and either deliberately or ignorantly failed to observe any discrepancies.

Porphyry was a 3rd century Syrian astrologer who worked in Athens and Rome. Again it is doubtful that Porphyry made any personal development of the system that bears his name. It is described in the earlier 2nd century text of Antiochus, who is presumed to have written slightly later than Ptolemy.¹⁷ Porphyry

16. Robert Pelletier, *Planets in Houses*, (Para Research, Maine, 1978); pp.13-14.

17. Antiochus, *The Thesaurus*, trans. R. Schmidt, ed. R. Hand. Project Hindsight Greek Track Vol. II-B. (Berkeley Springs: Golden Hind Press, 1993). Ch.46, pp.32-33.

excerpted extensively from Antiochus and the passage in which Antiochus describes this system is almost verbatim to one in Porphyry's later commentary on Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*.¹⁸ Because of the importance attached to Porphyry's studies of Ptolemy's astronomical and astrological theories, many believe that he had the best insight into the system Ptolemy would have used.

It is not surprising that Ptolemy should be stretched in so many directions in attempts to argue his support of favoured systems. Ptolemy's technical genius single him out as having a level of complex astronomical understanding that sets the bench mark many would wish to emulate. His stance is also considered critical in many matters relating to the true intention of classical astrology, and so his use of the houses is worth exploring in detail, particularly for those who have been persuaded that a return to the simple mechanics of the 'whole-sign method' would be a return to the original and purest use of houses. Is it possible to discover what the great man really thought of this issue?

18. *Ibid*, footnote 2, p.33.