

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

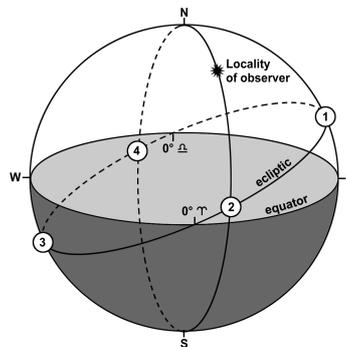
Since the Earth is a globe, an observer from any locality will always be at the centre of their own bowl of heaven, but in astrology the midheaven (MC) does not represent the point immediately overhead (our local zenith), but the point at which that meridian intersects with the ecliptic (see diagram below). The more northerly the latitude, the lower down towards the horizon the midheaven point will 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 1st 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 article 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.

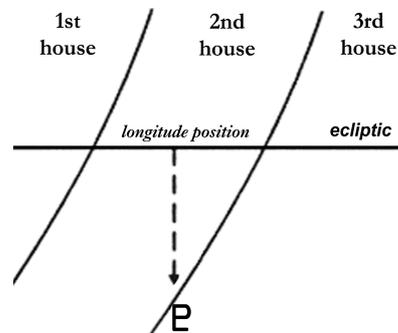
The point in favour of Campanus is that it readily lends itself to a three dimensional view of space by emphasizing the planet's position in relation to the horizon and meridian at the place of birth – hence there is a subtle shift of perspective in which the houses are not simply projected onto the 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*, (Sebastopol, CA: CRCS Publications, , 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

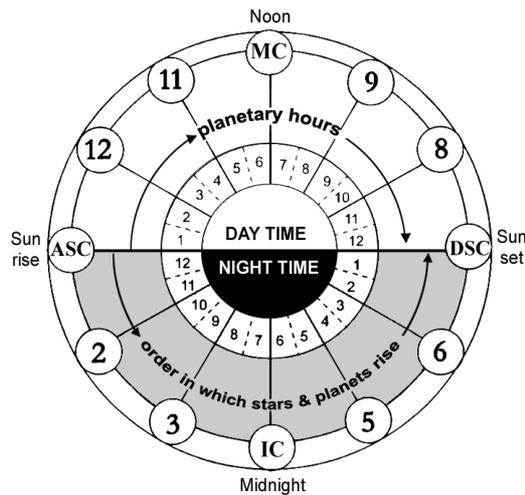
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12. Mike Wackford, 'Placido & the Semi-Arc Method of House Division'; *The Traditional Astrologer* magazine, (Nottingham: Ascella), Issue 7, Winter 1994, p.26.
 13. Placido de Titis, *Primum Mobile*, trans. John Cooper, London, 1814, op cit. p.47 facs. 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 circles. **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 Malchus 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*, (Maine: Para Research, 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.

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PTOLEMY'S 'POWERFUL PLACES' & THE EXTENSION OF HOUSE INFLUENCE

Our preface shall be an account of the places in the heavens to which reference is made when particular human events are theoretically considered, a kind of mark at which one must aim before proceeding further

Ptolemy, (c. 150 AD) *Tetrabiblos*, III.1

The use of houses in classical times is worthy of study, though we should bear in mind that classical astrology entailed its own perspective and methodology. Ptolemy in particular exhibits a general resistance to techniques infused with symbolic mysticism; where they are used, he attempts to explain their potency through what he considers a more 'logical' approach, (such as drawing an association with the aspects and planetary humours). Whereas Manilius, 'the poet', endeavoured to express the wonder and mystery of the heavens in majestic phases of poetic verse, Ptolemy 'the scientist' sought to rationalise astrology and emphasise its first principles by sweeping away any elements that appeared to be based on a mysticism older than that of the classical world:

“As for the nonsense on which many waste their labour and of which not even a plausible account can be given, this we shall dismiss in favour of the primary natural causes; we shall investigate, not by means of lots and numbers of which no reasonable explanation can be given, but merely through the science of the aspects of the stars to the places with which they have familiarity.”¹

1. *Tetrabiblos* III.3.

That the meanings of aspects are themselves based upon mystical numerological principles seems to have escaped Ptolemy's concern.

'Places of familiarity' are the signs of the zodiac or angles in the chart which reinforce a planet's natural disposition. The Sun, for example, has a natural affinity with the signs that are hot and dry, or the areas of the chart that are masculine and diurnal. Since the Sun rises in the east, it attributes to that cardinal the qualities of being masculine, dry, solar and diurnal. Conversely, the west is feminine, moist, lunar and nocturnal; "for it is always in the west that the Moon emerges and makes its appearance after conjunction"² The alignment of planets with areas of natural affinity was the kingpin around which Ptolemy's astrology revolved, and establishing whether a planet was in a place of familiarity was not determined through the use of houses, as witnessed in the planetary 'joys' of Manilius,³ but through association with other planets, places, and stars which share common humoral qualities of heat, coldness, dryness or moisture.

Although the houses are not entirely ignored in the *Tetrabiblos*, there is so little reference to them that the subject appears consciously avoided. In his first book, Ptolemy sets out the general principles of astrology, explaining the power and nature of the planets, aspects, fixed stars, signs of the zodiac, rulership of the signs, triplicities, exaltations, terms and faces. Although he offers some explanation of the four angles related to the seasons, in this vital introduction he fails to give a single reference to the use of the houses. He does, however, place strong emphasis upon relationships to the horizon and midheaven, and the correspondence between angles and directions. East, south, west and north are noted as dry, hot, moist and cold, respectively; the orient, he tells us, signifies youth, the midheaven middle-age, the occident old age, and those who have died.⁴ Ptolemy doesn't explain the philosophical basis for these associations, but whether he recognised it or not, he is clearly perpetuating ancient solar mysticism which ties the meaning of the

2. Ibid II.2.

3. Ptolemy omits all reference to planetary joys.

4. II.7.

angles to a symbolic appreciation of the Sun's apparent cycle around the Earth. This inherent symbolism cuts through the entire work and can be demonstrated by the stress he places on the condition of being oriental or occidental:⁵

Their [*the planets*'] power must be determined, in the first place, from the fact that they are either oriental and adding to their proper motion – for then they are most powerful – or occidental and diminishing in speed, for then their energy is weaker. Second, it is to be determined from their position relative to the horizon; for they are most powerful when they are in the midheaven or approaching it, and second when they are exactly on the horizon or in the succedent place [*1st house*]; their power is greater when they are in the orient; and less when they culminate beneath the earth or are in some other aspect to the orient; if they bear no aspect at all to the orient they are entirely powerless.⁶

Ptolemy's view of the places that bear no aspect to the horizon accords with the general understanding of the 8th, 2nd, 12th, and 6th houses as describing weakness and impotency.⁷ But whereas a working, predictive astrologer might dwell on the use of the symbolism in describing that condition of weakness, Ptolemy does not. Instead, there is the suggestion that we should ignore these areas in our investigation in favour of the powerful regions.

The midheaven is referred to as the most important angle of all and many spheres of life that we would assign to other houses are assessed by Ptolemy through the use of the culminating degree and the place that is succeeding to it. By this he means the 10th house, as the area that is rising by diurnal motion to the degree of the

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5. The terms 'oriental' and 'occidental' when referring to the houses or the angles, simply mean 'eastern' and 'western' respectively. However, with regards to the planets, the terms generally mean 'rising before the Sun' (oriental) or 'rising after the Sun' (occidental). See the glossary for further details.
 6. I.10.
 7. Antiochus refers to these houses, along with the 3rd house, as "places in which no dealings are made". *Thesaurus* ch.27.

midheaven. This area is representative of all our outward endeavours and accomplishments: our actions, friendships, children, and everything from which our reputation is established. Second in importance is the eastern horizon from which the bodily form, temperament, intellect and formative years are assessed. Consistency with later tradition is evident in Ptolemy's use of angularity as denoting strength and speed, and the denial of these qualities with cadency:

“For they [*the planets*] are most effective whenever they are passing through the angles or in the signs that rise after them They are weakest when they are declining from the angles, also we must observe whether they are at the angles or in the succedent signs; for if they are oriental or at angles they are more effective at the beginning, if they are occidental or in the succeeding signs they are slower to take action.”⁸

It is important to realise that when Ptolemy talks about planets in places or signs ‘succeeding to angles’, he is not referring to planets in succedent houses, but those in angular houses that are not yet on the angle but are succeeding to it by diurnal motion. The further removed from the angle, the weaker the influence. Ptolemy further acknowledges that the cadent houses represent foreign places and alien circumstances by his comment that when the Moon is declining from angles “she portends journeys abroad or changes of place”.⁹

The extent to which Ptolemy fails to expand upon use of the houses is most apparent in books three and four where he explains the techniques for judging a nativity. Marriage, for example, is not determined from the 7th house, but from the place of the Sun for a woman, and the Moon for a man. Matters relating to material wealth are not referred to the 2nd house, but the part of fortune (Fortuna). Friendships are not judged from the 11th house, but from the condition of the Sun, Moon, Fortuna and rising sign. Where he discusses the parents and the potential of patrimony, he does not recommend a consideration of the 4th house, but refers us to the

8. III.3.

9. IV.8.

place of the Sun or Saturn for the father, and the Moon or Venus for the mother. There are few instances where Ptolemy appears to support our later tradition. In one, he directs us to the 12th house, “The House of Evil Daemon”, for matters of slavery because it is an “injurious” position which declines from the horizon. In matters of illness he also notes the need to consider the 6th house, saying:

“It is necessary to look to the two angles of the horizon, that is, the orient and the occident, and especially to the occident itself and the sign preceding it [*6th*], which is disjunct from the oriental angle.”¹⁰

Ptolemy's reasoning is that the descendant is destructive to vitality, and the area preceding the descendant shares this influence because it is declining (by diurnal motion) from that angle and unascended to the ascendant. Most telling of all, however, is an obtuse reference to the influence of the lower midheaven, which we become aware of only through his description of the effect of planetary stations:

“Evening stations and positions at midheaven beneath the earth [*IC*]... produce souls noble and wise investigators of hidden things and seekers after the unknown.”¹¹

Whilst Ptolemy makes no attempt to explain why this should be so, the reference to “hidden things” suggests that it is drawn from a contemporary understanding of the 4th house, arguing that he had more awareness of the wider use of the houses than he seems willing to impart.

Clearly, Ptolemy regarded the houses as being somewhat irrelevant, but the question of which method of house construction he was referring to has still managed to provoke great debate. His constant overlapping of the words ‘place’ and ‘sign’, and the way in which he refers to the midheaven as ‘the culminating sign’ has been used to suggest that he considered the ‘places’ to be defined by the signs of the zodiac, supporting the ‘whole-sign’ argument.

10. *Tetrabiblos* II.5.

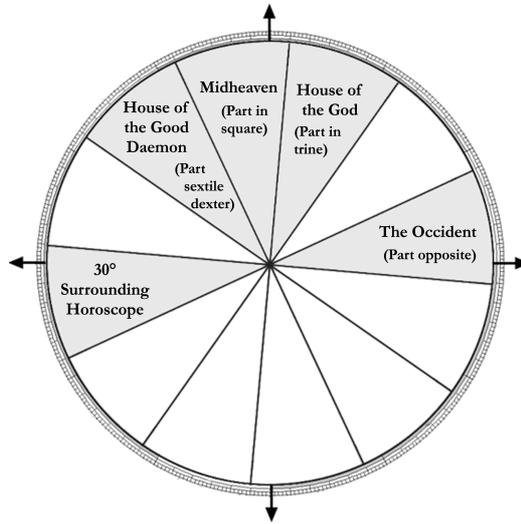
11. *Ibid* III.3.

There remains, however, one highly significant passage in which he offers a definition of the houses. It is contained within his method of determining length of life and Ptolemy explains that for a matter of such importance, the planets from which we draw judgement must be located in the powerful places, which he describes as follows:

“In the first place we must consider those places ... in which the planet must be that is to receive the lordship of the prorogation; namely, the twelfth part of the zodiac surrounding the horoscope, from 5° above the actual horizon up to the 25° that remains, which is rising in succession to the horizon [*ie.*, *1st house*]; the part sextile dexter to these thirty degrees, called the House of the Good Daemon [*11th house*]; the part in quartile, the midheaven [*10th house*]; the part in trine, called the House of the God [*9th house*]; and the part opposite, the Occident [*7th house*].”¹²

This is all that Ptolemy has to say on the technical basis of the houses within his *Tetrabiblos*. In assessing its importance, the introductory comment on the 1st house is the one that is most pertinent: *the twelfth part of the zodiac surrounding the horoscope, from 5° above the actual horizon*

Ptolemy’s Powerful Places



12. Ibid III.10.

up to the 25° that remains, which is rising in succession to the horizon. The 5° misplacement from the ascendant has caused much debate; the most sensible explanation being that the virtue of each house has been assigned a 5° influence before the cusp. The same approach is used today by astrologers schooled in traditional techniques, so that if a planet is within 5° of the next house cusp, it is considered to have its influence within the context of that house. But on the basis of Ptolemy's comment here, some authorities have sought to formally recognize a new house construction method, the **Classical house system**, which is generally said to follow Alcabitius, but with the subtraction of 5° from the Ascendant to find the 1st-house cusp. This definition is misleading, since the 5° misplacement (or orb for the house cusps) is written into traditional technique, regardless of the house method in use, so this should be considered a principle of house interpretation rather than a method of division. Ptolemy's comment *up to the 25° that remains* also, at face value, appears to support the use of equal-house division, requiring that each house should cover 30° of zodiacal arc in order that it embraces the preceding 5° and a further 25° following it. Yet if we cross-reference this passage with the contemporary text of Antiochus who gives a fuller explanation, we can see that other astrologers referred to these degrees in a very similar manner, even where they unquestionably demonstrated unequal house division:

“Each of these 12 places obtains as its lot the 5 pre-ascended degrees and the 25 post-ascending degrees, if the squares [*ie, the angles*] should occur through ninety degrees. But if they should occur with different numbers of degrees, divide the degrees of the square numbers equally into three parts, and you would know how many degrees each place of the zodiac has”.¹³

Antiochus goes on to clarify the principle with an example, allowing us a little more insight into how the houses were determined by an astrologer in the 2nd century. Should we presume that Ptolemy, who

13. *The Thesaurus* ch.46, p.32.

says so little about the matter as a whole, would feel a necessity to be anywhere near as detailed as Antiochus in a passage that is not intended to clarify house construction concepts, but only what he means by the places of power? Resting only on this, the assumption that Ptolemy utilised a simple, equal-house division, would appear to be hastily drawn and readily questioned.

Was Ptolemy more inclined towards a whole-house system? I consider this unlikely given his personal inclination towards technical sophistication. Let's consider his reference to the 'twelfth part' of the zodiac, which may seem confusing to those of us accustomed to numbering the signs from the ascendant in an anti-clockwise direction following the numerical order of the houses. Neither Ptolemy nor Manilius attributed numbers to the houses but described them instead by their names and aspectual relationship to the ascendant. The fact that Ptolemy makes a distinction between the places of heaven and the parts of the zodiac, and that he introduces this numeration here (though not for the houses), suggests that he recognised them as two discrete frames of reference which were not dependant upon each other, even if in common practice they were frequently associated with each other. Within the work of Valens, for example, whose demonstrations of astrology in appear to offer strong testimony to the use of whole-sign houses, there is the reminder that correct computation requires the calculation of degrees and not just a simplified association between sign and house.¹⁴

14. Robert Schmidt's translation of Valens (Book IX, chapter 3), revealed in his introduction to Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* Bk III reads:

"But before all it is necessary to reckon the places to the degree. And at least whenever the degree of the Horoskopos may be grasped, it is necessary to count from that degree up until the 30 degree completion of the next zoidion. And that will be the place concerning life. Then similarly up to the completion of another 30 degrees concerning livelihood; and the next as before."

Translations of charts from the files of Valens in *Greek Horoscopes* by Neugebauer and Van Hoesen illustrate that there are other reminders that, although houses and aspects are discussed according to the

Again referring to Ptolemy's comment that the first house is counted from 5° above the horizon up to the 25° remaining, we can see that the purpose of his house division was not to make a simple association with the signs, but was based upon a genuine attempt to establish reliable boundaries to areas of increased efficiency. In his recognition of 'powerful places' Ptolemy offers philosophical agreement with the principles expressed in Manilius's *Astronomica*: demonstrating that the roots of house meanings lie buried within their ability to empower or diminish planetary efficiency, and thus bringing spotlighted areas of maximum significance around the cusps, which form the focus of their aspectual contact with the ascendant, (and thus supporting the views of many astrologers that the cusps have an extended orb of influence in the same way that planets do). We have already reviewed one passage where, in determining the power and speed of planetary effect, Ptolemy talks about the need to observe whether planets are at the angles or succeeding to them, meaning (for example) to differentiate between a planet in the first house and one that is more powerful by being located on the ascendant itself.

Almost certainly the 5° misplacement of the first house influence is a recognition of the fact that a planet within 5° of the ascendant, whether preceding it or succeeding it, can be considered angular and powerful; with the same principal applying to other angles and impacting upon the definition of status with regard to all matters of angularity and cadency.

relationships of the signs, they are more precisely computed by degrees. For example, referring to horoscope L75, the commentators note (p.89):

“... we have here a case where we can see that Vettius Valens computed his horoscopes with an accuracy of degrees and minutes even if he normally quotes zodiacal signs only”.

The commentators list three more horoscopes that make explicit references to degrees and minutes and four more where degrees are mentioned but not minutes.

Confusion over ‘the Limits of Angularity’

The issue of where we draw our limits for what constitutes a planet ‘on an angle’ (rather than one that is generally defined as angular by being in an angular house) has always been highly contentious and Ptolemy’s comments on this matter proved to be a decisive influence upon many of the arguments. We can see an example in Henry Coley’s translation of ‘*The Considerations of Guido Bonatus*’, where the 59th is given as:

“... to consider, whether the significator be behind the cusp of an Angle 15 degrees and no more; for he shall be said to be in an Angle as well as he that is exactly there, as “Zael” affirms; whence he said before that it was not in an Angle, nor had any strength there beyond the 15th degree after the cusp of the Angle: For example. The Ascendant is 4 degrees of Taurus, and the end thereof was behind the Angle, whatever planet is posited from the 4th to the 19th degree thereof is in the angle, but what is beyond that is not; but Ptolemy [*sic*] seems to intimate, though he says not expressly, “that every planet who shall be 5 degrees before, or 25 degrees after the cusp, is in the Angle.” Now “Zael” would clear the doubt, lest that great distance of the planet from the Angle should hinder the business.”¹⁵

This passage actually shows a misunderstanding of Ptolemy’s text on the part of Bonatus, because Ptolemy did indeed differentiate between a planet on an angle, and one which is simply ‘succeeding’ to it – by which he means within the angular house. The original quotation from Zael¹⁶ appears to be referring simply to this definition

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15. *Anima Astrologiae: The Astrologer’s Guide*, facsimile edition (republished by Regulus Publishing Co. Ltd., London, 1986) pp.28-29.
 16. Zael (otherwise known as ‘Zahel’) was a Jewish mathematician, physician and astrologer who died between 822 and 850 C.E. His 9th century text *Introductoriam ad astrologiam seu de iudiciis* (‘Introduction to Astrology, or Concerning Judgments’) was evidently a strong influence upon the 13th century Italian astrologer Guido Bonatii – ‘Bonatus’ as he is known in the more formal Latinised version of his name. Henry Coley, who was William Lilly’s adopted son, translated Bonatii’s Latin text into English in 1675.

of a planet 'on an angle', but the assumption that Zael was either redefining the measurement of angular houses or the extent of their signification, started a chain of confusion which has left the heads of even the greatest astrologers spinning in circles. Coley's translation compounds the confusion by adding an editorial note of contradiction from William Lilly, who also interprets this as a reference to the signification of angular houses, rather than the greater power of the angle itself, commenting:

"The same Ptolomy [*sid*] (from whom I cannot differ) seems to assert, That no part of any House remains void of virtue; and myself am of opinion, I think not idly, that every planet that is in any House shall be said to be in that House where he is found, from the beginning of the House even to the end thereof; and therefore I say in the House, not in the Sign, because sometimes the same House comprehends more than one Sign and sometimes less; for it seems ridiculous that any part of any House should continue idle, and be left void of virtue."¹⁷

Apart from mistaking the reference to planets 'in an angle' with those in angular houses, Lilly's interjection added further confusion by not making clear that he too advocated the use of a 5° orb preceding the cusp, so that planets at the end of one house were associated with the next – this was a principle he applied in his chart work, sometimes extending the 5° limit where a planet went a degree or so beyond.¹⁸

Recent re-evaluations of Bonnatti's work have brought to light a further passage that has been used to argue that cusps might originally have been used as the mid-point of house determination rather than the beginning of their influence – this again takes the 9th century text of Zael as its source.¹⁹ The passage in question is very

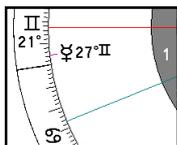
17. *Anima Astrologiae: The Astrologer's Guide* p.28.

18. On page 154 of *Christian Astrology* Lilly refuses a planet signification in the following house because it wants "more than five degrees of the Cusp" yet on p.180 he assigns Fortuna to the 2nd house, even though it is 6°25' before the cusp of the 2nd house, saying that although this is more than the standard five degrees "yet were it absurd to think it had signification in the first".

ambiguous, with the assumption that the first house influence ends midway through the house resting on a reference to Mercury, (ruler of the Gemini ascendant and located at 27° Gemini), ‘changing domicile’ and moving to the 2nd house, even though it is nowhere near the 2nd house cusp. In this chart the ascendant is at 21° Gemini, the 2nd house cusp is at 13° Cancer, and the text reads:

“And because the lord of the Ascendant was being moved from his own domicile into another, it was signified through the lord’s position that the questioner was moving within a short time; *and because the lord was being moved to the second house* [my italics], it was seen that the move would be in order to acquire for himself substance which he did not have. And it was seen that the move for the sake of acquiring money for himself would be made to a certain place in which he had already remained at another time.”

The reference to Mercury moving to the 2nd house, even though it is 16 degrees before the 2nd house cusp (and only 6° removed from the ascendant), has brought the suggestion that the cusp does not reliably indicate where the influence of the house begins. Yet it was very common for traditional astrologers to refer to zodiac signs as the ‘houses’ of the planets, and as Mercury moves from Gemini to Cancer, it enters its own second ‘house’ in the sense that this is the second sign from its area of natural rulership. We find similar reasoning applied to the oft-repeated traditional aphorism that the Moon is debilitated in Gemini because this is the 12th house from



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19. The passage appears in a chart judgement presented in J.D. North’s *Horoscopes and History*, pp.77-79. For Robert Hand’s review of the relevant passage see ‘A Study in Early House Division’, *AA Journal*, July, 1997; reproduced online at <http://www.astrologer.com/aanet/pub/journal/joju97.html>.

her own. The overlapping of the terminology and principle of dominion is confusing and needs to be carefully considered in context; but we should pause before rushing to re-evaluate our way of determining houses based upon passages like this, which were probably composed without any appreciation of the confusion and close scrutiny they might later attract.

Rather rashly, some have used passages like those of Zael's discussed above to question whether our modern methods of determining houses through quadrant systems are properly reasoned and supported by tradition. This is despite the fact that the latter passage is easily explained and what seems to be in question in the first is only what constitutes a reliable definition of angularity (the contentions about which have been clearly known, considered, argued, resolved, re-questioned and then brought up again for further debate as an ongoing saga throughout the history of our art). Perhaps further evidence along the lines of authenticating Gauquelin's research may offer a more grounded justification for reviewing the definitions of house determination and meaning within the branch of natural astrology, but certainly within the field of judicial astrology, no philosophical argument or demonstration of astrology in practice has shown itself able to undermine the validity of alternate systems. Is there one technically correct and philosophically pure system which would be right where all other's fail? If there is, we are nowhere close to finding it.

Accepting the Unsavoury

Whilst we appreciate all the mathematical challenges that house construction entails, we should never step too far from the realization that ancient astrologers faced a much greater challenge: to obtain an accurate recording of time in the first place. Ptolemy gives an insight into his striving to mark the ascendant by "the specific degree" in his third book where he talks about the difficulties faced when trying to ascertain the "fraction of the hour of the birth"; and where he refers to the frequency of error caused through:

“the solar instruments by the occasional shifting of their positions, or of their gnomons, and the water clocks by stoppages and irregularities in the flow of the water from different causes and by mere chance.”²⁰

Appendix C reproduces the advice of the 11th century Arabic astrologer, Al-Biruni, on how to take the hour of birth. Although written a thousand years later than the text of Ptolemy, it provides a remarkable reminder of the wholly different set of circumstances confronting astrologers living in the pre-automated-clock era. In view of such difficulties, it is hardly surprising that, as ancient astrologers strived for theoretical perfection, they settled for practical adequacy. This raises the question of whether we should, therefore, place so much emphasis on the working examples we possess that point to the use of simplified techniques. Throughout these ancient texts, we find regular reminders that, although students are taught by generalities, they must nonetheless take care to base their calculations upon the actual degree of the zodiac and not simply by sign position alone. No doubt, various points were simplified in order to elucidate other features of the chart, and one wonders whether these astrologers would have bothered to calculate complex mathematical formulas where the hour of birth had been rounded up in any case. More than anything else, it should be remembered that, when we query the methods of the ancients, the gaps in our knowledge are filled by conventional knowledge as it currently stands. It could be argued that any translation of terminology is largely a personal interpretation of the intent of an author, so we can never be entirely confident about the meaning of passages that refer to a lifestyle and a viewpoint we no longer possess.

In this, I am as guilty as anyone else, but my summary is that the modern astrologer, seeking to resolve the problem of house division by reference to historical sources, will ultimately conclude that these sources do not, will not, and cannot provide an authoritative voice. The problem exists because there are so many valid frames of

20. Ibid II.2.

reference, and it is impossible to fully recognize the symbolic potential of them all within any one technique. So, we must make our selection according to where our own inclinations lie. When we individually accept this as part of our own responsibility for shaping the personal astrology that we use, then 'the problem of the houses' ceases to exist. It can be seen as nothing more than the dilemma of choosing from the range of styles, techniques, and rulerships that runs through every other multifaceted branch of our art. Our reliance upon houses comes from our desire to find a more personal relationship between the planetary positions as they shape themselves to the unique qualities of the space and time surrounding the chart. We must accept another level to this: that the truly personal relationship emerges from the central position of the astrologer, who strives to draw meaning and symbolic appreciation of celestial movements and cycles and, in this, holds true to the principles of astrology as a study that extends from astronomical principles rather than resting on them entirely.