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ASTROLOGICAL PRACTICE: CASTING A HOROSCOPE

INTRODUCTION: THE ASTROLOGERS

ology is a technically complex discipline, and the exposition in the foregoing chapter may have seemed baffling to the uninitiated. The way of showing how it actually worked, I am going to take the individual birth chart and illustrate how two ancient astrologers had interpreted it, according to the generalised instructions in their works. They are quite different sources, in that they separated by several centuries, and that one was written in Greek the other in Latin. However, they are remarkably similar, rating the tenacity of astrological tradition. The reason that they deal for such an experiment is that they present themselves as the handbooks, and offer precise predictions corresponding to particular configurations.

The first astrological work I use is the *Mathesis*, the Greek word meaning learning, which had come to connote astrological knowledge in particular. It was written by Firmicus Maternus, a Roman from Sicily who had been a lawyer, between 334 and 357 CE. He was thus a member of the Roman elite, and the work was dedicated to a patron high up in the imperial civil service, who is known to us from other evidence. The second work is the *Pentateuch*, or 'work of five books' by Dorotheus of Sidon, dated on the basis of the horoscopes to the mid-first century CE. This was in fact one of the 'Firmicus' sources. Though Dorotheus' importance had long been forgotten, only fragments of his original text were available until 1976. That year David Pingree published the Arabic translation, which was based on a third-century Pahlavi translation of the Greek. This had some obvious interpolations, two horoscopes from the third and fourth centuries CE, a couple of additions from Vettius Valens

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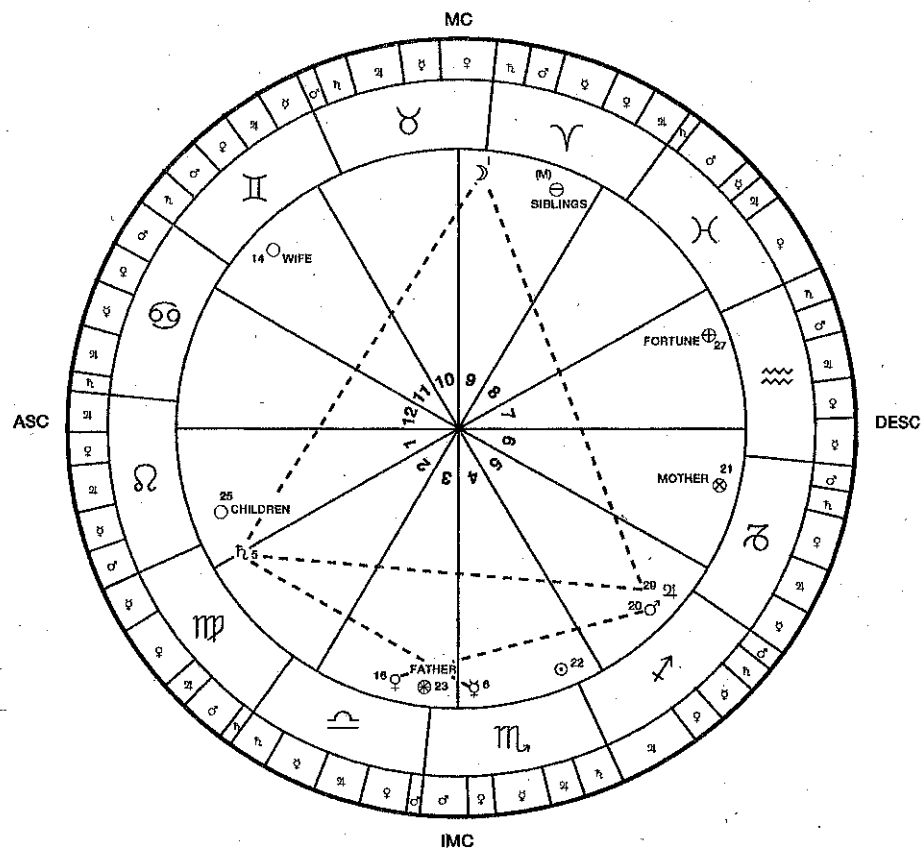
and another from Indian astrology.¹ Such imperfect texts are unfortunately the norm in this field.

The birth chart I have chosen to illustrate astrological practice is that of Prince Charles. This native has the advantage that the exact time of birth was recorded. Furthermore, the prince, like his ancient counterparts, was the subject of great interest to contemporary astrologers. But the real interest could have been provided by using any individual horoscope, ancient or modern, because it is only by having a particular horoscope that one can see how the theory in the textbooks could have been translated into practice. In this way, one can pick out from the mass of confusing material only those predictions related to the various configurations which characterise a particular nativity. The first thing which strikes us is that the interpretations which follow differ interestingly from those of modern astrologers. The immediate impression is that there is much less interest in character, and a much greater willingness to offer precise predictions. But as we shall see, there is much more to be revealed about the nature of ancient astrological theory.

The diagram of the birth chart (Figure 22) has been drawn to illustrate with as much clarity as possible the system according to Firmicus, which is clearest. The cardinal points, rather than being calculated, are simply set 90 degrees apart, and the Places are thus simply twelve 30-degree sections starting from the Ascendant, with their Latin names according to Firmicus.² The outermost circle illustrates the terms of each planet according to Firmicus. The aspects between planets are drawn with dotted lines. The Lots are represented by circles with the names of their provinces, such as Wife, Brothers and so on. The positions of the planets were calculated on the basis of modern ephemerides.

FIRMICUS MATERNUS

Here I go through the treatise in order, picking out any parts which relate to the particular circumstances of Charles's nativity. Charles was born at 9.14 p.m. on 14 November 1948. There are a number of general factors to take into consideration. As this is a nocturnal chart, Venus, Mars, Mercury and the Moon are made more favourable, and the Sun, Jupiter and Saturn less so. There is a Mars-Jupiter conjunction, the Moon and Mercury are in opposition, Saturn, the Moon and Jupiter are in trine, Venus and Mars are in sextile, as are Saturn and Mercury. Because of the *antisia* (shadows thrown opposite) cast



KEY			
SIGNS OF THE ZODIAC		LUMINARIES	
ARIES	♈	SUN	☉
TAURUS	♉	MOON	☾
GEMINI	♊	PLANETS	
CANCER	♋	SATURN	♄
LEO	♌	JUPITER	♃
VIRGO	♍	VENUS	♀
LIBRA	♎	MARS	♂
SCORPIO	♏	MERCURY	☿
SAGITTARIUS	♐		
CAPRICORN	♑		
AQUARIUS	♒		
PISCES	♓		

Figure 22 Horoscope of Prince Charles.

between Mars in Sagittarius and Capricorn in the dejected Place of Disease, Venus in Libra and Pisces in the Place of Death, the Sun and Mercury in Scorpio and Aquarius in the Place of Marriage (in opposition to the Ascendant), there are bad influences on these planets. On the other hand, the *antiscia* of the Moon in Taurus and Leo in the Place of Life, of Jupiter in Sagittarius and Capricorn in the Place of Children, and of Saturn in Virgo and Aries in the Place of Journeys, ensure that the Moon's and Jupiter's favourable influence is increased and Saturn's malign influence tempered. The dodecatemories of the Sun and Venus are in the terms of Saturn, and thus under his malign influence, those of the Moon, Jupiter and Mars in the terms of Mercury, of Mercury in the terms of Venus, thus under her benign influence.

With this in mind, we are able to compute the length of life at a little less than a healthy eighty-four years, with Venus, the ruler of the Moon's sign, in her house and favourably aspected. Firmicus' methods here are very crude.³

In Book 3 the first detailed predictions are generated by the position of the planets relative to the Places. Here I keep as close to the original words as possible.⁴ The fact that Saturn is on the cusp of the second Place indicates serious illnesses and great reversals of fortune. Firmicus tells us that Charles is to become the murderer of his wife and children, and a frequent agitator of great public disturbances, and he wastes his paternal and maternal substance. He is slow in all his activities and suffers from constant bodily afflictions.⁵ However, before passing on this shocking information to the national press, you will need to know that there is better news for the prince as well. Jupiter in the fifth Place implies a great increase in prosperity, particularly as he is in his own house (Sagittarius). Jupiter is also in conjunction with Mars and in his terms, so the native will be outstanding in regal power, and all his pronouncements will be accepted as if from holy writ. He will have a strong body and healthy bones. But this is not the whole story. Since Jupiter is in aspect to the waning Moon, and it is a nocturnal chart, he will merely make men of decent character, raised to the honour of a moderate position.⁶

The other planets' relationships to the Places and signs add further predictions. Mars in the fifth Place by night, in the house of Saturn, indicates good fortune in possessions. Honours will be decreed by the people, and friendship offered by great men.⁷ Venus in a middling Place, but in her house and in favourable aspect to Mars, suggests

fame, power and riches.⁸ Mercury in the fourth Place makes the native sharp of mind, in charge of public activities, erudite in many kinds of learning, but being with the Sun in this Place, also makes him low-class and skilled in secret and illegal arts, though sober and honest.⁹ The Moon in the ninth Place forces some to cultivate rites of the most important religions, while others carry on business for women.¹⁰

In Book 4 Firmicus continues consideration of the Moon. Here the luminary offers dismal predictions for the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh. Being in an important Place, but waning and in aspect to Saturn, makes the parents low-class, slaves, or immersed in poverty or misfortune. Some will have mothers who are sickly or who meet a violent death in the early years. Or the native himself will be sickly, short-lived and will meet an evil death.¹¹ Being on the wane, in aspect to Jupiter, the Moon decrees that the native will be adopted, or left to die and later returned to the parents. Such men seek income by their own efforts, and over a period of time achieve advancement, power and fame.¹² The waning Moon moving away from Saturn in aspect to Jupiter makes caretakers to whom private affairs are entrusted, who travel for business; or they become sea-captains, shop-owners or tax-collectors, or one of those who exercise their professions around water. In this way they earn a modest living.¹³

As for the opposition of Mercury to the Moon, Firmicus observes: 'This indicates infinite vices and unheard-of evils. Therefore we should pray the man should not be thus.' Yet the aspect to Jupiter suggests an abundance of good things.

Firmicus mentions four methods of determining the ruler of the chart.¹⁴ The preferred one allots this role to Mars, who makes men:

fierce, unconquerable, active, quarrelsome, bold, involved in dangers, violent but liable to be deceived in various ways. They are gluttonous and digest food easily; brave, just, fiery. They have red hair and bloodshot eyes, commanding ways, always seeking positions of power. Their occupations have to do with iron and fire. They are monstrously bad-tempered, never get on with wives, children or friends, and are envious of others' possessions.

Afflictions such as cuts and bruises are frequent; they often fall from high places and break their arms and legs. (A warning against polo, perhaps?) They will meet a sudden and violent death. However, the bad influence of Mars will be somewhat blunted by the favourable

aspect of Venus.¹⁵ Being in the house of Saturn and in the fifth Place, as the Moon wanes, with Jupiter in trine to one of the cardinal points, Mars makes powerful, awe-inspiring generals and tribunes ruling great regions and many states, entrusted with control of the whole world.

Mercury is the planet which determines occupations, being in opposition to one of the cardinal points. In a solid sign, he makes important judges or record-keepers. However, this is not a strong prediction because he is neither in his house nor in his terms.¹⁶

In typical style Firmicus introduces a new determinant with a dramatic expression of religious awe: 'I am now about to explain fearful secrets which the revered ancients left wrapped in obscurity so that they should not come to the ears of the profane.' He concludes:

That most true and immutable theory the ancients left wrapped in obscurity so that it should not come to the notice of everyone. The great Petosiris touched on it only lightly; not that he was not familiar with it (for he had arrived at all forbidden secrets), but he did not want to divulge it lest his work should lose its divine character.

Completely contradicting his earlier exposition of the decans, he tells us of the Egyptian version, which he claims is the really significant one. Though there are three decans to every sign, their power does not extend to all 30 degrees of each sign. In each sign decans possess certain degrees and not others. Those they possess are called 'full', those where they have no power, 'empty'. This amounts to the observation that with three planets in 'full degrees', Saturn in Chenene, Mercury in Sentacer and Venus in Sepisent – Charles will have good fortune above the ordinary. Also, because the Ascendant is in a full degree (Craumonis), he will be very strong in vitality, courage, animal spirits, type of body, and power of authority. The Midheaven, the Lot of Fortune, and the planet determining occupations are also in full degrees, which bodes well. However, the ruler of the chart lies in empty degrees, which diminishes his power.¹⁷

The treatise goes on to explain masculine and feminine degrees. These determine whether the chart is masculine or feminine. The means by which they do this, and the significance of the conclusion, is not explained.¹⁸

The fifth book begins with a consideration of signs in which the angles are located. The Ascendant in Leo indicates many toils and dangers, but great fame. The native will be free-born, have unlimited

power, and never use it for evil. He will secure his possessions by his own efforts.¹⁹

But the Midheaven in Taurus indicates life in a public place or a temple. It also holds the clue to Charles's fortunes in marriage, indicating:

marriage with a widow, or a woman seduced by, or subject to another, or in a servile condition, or an old woman, or an object of public shame.

However, Charles will be greatly honoured by a powerful man, will be knowledgeable in all things and have a great increase in good fortune.²⁰

If Firmicus had actually calculated the Midheaven, he would have found it at 13 degrees Aries. His prediction for those with the Midheaven in Aries is that they will be involved with powerful men; their daily living is afforded from foreign investments. They will always be seeking possessions and luxuries. But their resources will be constantly in a state of flux, so that as often as they lose, they will gain the whole back again.²¹

The Descendant in Aquarius prescribes a life of ups and downs, and in some cases popularity and approval. The IC (*Imum Caelum*) in Scorpio merely shows that the native will be in charge of certain projects.²² 'Some readers', observes Firmicus, 'may think that these are just general remarks, but there is substance in them.'²³

Next, he goes on to consider briefly the influence of the terms. The Ascendant's being in Jupiter's terms indicates virtue and wisdom.²⁴ He leaves the subject to deal with the meanings of the planets in different signs. The presence of Saturn in Virgo means illnesses and problems in early life, and more serious evils when it transits to Capricorn or Taurus, or double signs. (Saturn stays in a sign about every two-and-a-half years. In four years and eight months he would have reached the double sign of Cancer, and in seven years and four months he would have reached Taurus.) Then it brings riots, losses, anxieties, griefs, sudden dangers and destruction. But when it is passing through other signs it indicates good deeds and occupations, fame and increase in income; at least the native will be freed from difficulties, toil and danger and get rest. That period of time will be considered joyful and glorious. When Charles is twenty-nine years and four months old, Saturn will come into Virgo again, bringing ill luck. He will have to make his own way in life rather than relying on his parents. Sometimes he will be in a low position and sometimes

in a high one. He will be constantly moved around from one place and from one business to another. Whatever he gains at first will be lost; but when lost it will be regained; but he will lose it again and never be able to attain the income he seeks.²⁵

The position of Saturn offers further insight into Charles's marital arrangements:

There will be trouble with women in early life. Wives allotted to them in early life will not stay with them; the legal wives they take later will not agree with them and they will not have a happy life with them. They will not have virgins for wives, but women seduced by others, or who have already had children. If they do marry virgins, they quickly separate from them. They do not remain with one woman, but finally marry in the lower classes, and these wives they cherish with faithful affection.²⁶

Saturn adds more on other areas of life: Charles will be learned and wise, engaged in many activities and seeking many things. But whenever he attains anything he seeks he wastes the substance of his possessions. He will sustain many losses on behalf of others, but will be deceitful in these situations. He will be involved in popular pursuits, known to all, and familiar to all. Because Saturn is in the first Place, he will lose children and waste their inheritance. Some are allotted relatives for wives.²⁷

Jupiter in Sagittarius will make the natives famous and powerful, rich and learned. They will have possessions abroad, be of good character and trained in every courtesy. However, they lose everything when Saturn crosses the first Place, a time when there will be disturbances, griefs, revolutions, and unfortunate outcomes to projects. This is the case for Charles's first year, and then every twelve years for a year. Thus, from 14 November of 1960, of 1972, of 1984, of 1996 and so on, an *annus horribilis* would follow. But when Jupiter reaches his own house (Sagittarius or Pisces) with a favourable aspect, prosperity and good fortune will come little by little. On the first occasion, after five years and twelve days, a sextile with Mercury and a trine with Saturn may set Charles on the right track, though they can hardly be said to be the most favourable aspects. Thanks to the position of Jupiter, in the first part of his life Charles can be expected to be irresponsible and to quarrel with his wife. But once he reaches middle age, his luck changes.²⁸

Firmicus has a severe warning regarding people like Charles who have Mercury in a decan of Mars, and Mars in a term of Mercury:

Never make a companion of those who have Mercury in the terms or decans of Mars, or trust them to confide in. They will deny and will persist in their outrageousness with wicked defence of their perjury. They will be prepared for every crime of infamy, especially if with Mercury thus located, Mars is found in the terms of Mercury . . . In that case the natives will suffer from prison or exile or, fearing court sentence, will wander as fugitives far from their household gods.²⁹

As a culminating pessimistic forecast for the prince from the fifth book, Firmicus notes that the waning Moon in the terms of Mercury makes people 'malicious, wicked, consumptive, mentally disturbed or insane. They willingly associate themselves with every kind of wickedness, defend evil men and evil deeds, and their depravity increases from day to day; they are even hostile to men of their own kind.'³⁰

Book 6 reveals one set of bright stars. Quite a different set are revealed in Book 8. But ancient astrologers could congratulate themselves on having the option of revealing that the Ascendant in the 5th degree of Leo is in the bright star Regulus, the star of kings.³¹ This indicates the highest royal or imperial power. They would doubtless have ignored the prediction in Book 8 that the man with his Ascendant in this degree would become the master or oiler of athletes!³²

The treatise moves on to consider the planetary aspects. With Saturn in trine to Jupiter, and Mercury in sextile, Charles should be involved in obscure religious rites or will carry on the business of kings. Often he will lead a famous diplomatic mission. But these men are worn out by excessive misfortune concerning their children; they lose sons and are forced to raise the children of others.³³ The indications from Mercury's opposition to the Moon reinforce an earlier prediction relating to progressions from planetary positions in the terms. British republicans can take comfort then: this aspect stirs up attacks of the multitude and popular revolution. The timid natives are always persecuted in public meetings by the malevolent voices of the people.³⁴

Taking the sextile aspects as having half the impact of similar trines, according to Firmicus' instructions,³⁵ enables us to observe that the native will be quite intelligent and talented, with some interest in learning, quite serious in character in early life. He will tend to argue for his point of view. He could be in charge of public

accounts or the privy purse, and make a reasonable amount of money from this. So much for Saturn and Mercury.³⁶ As for Mars and Venus, since the locations are favourable, they indicate some daily profit as a result of constant effort, and a fairly prosperous marriage. Charles will have a moderately good reputation, be quite proud of his high position and have several marriages.³⁷

The conjunction of Jupiter and Mars repeats the ascription of great power.³⁸ Charles will govern a great state, or at least an important region. He will achieve his desires, reach the highest office and control the greatest armies. But the injury the Sun inflicts on Mercury implies that Charles will never shine in anything he does, and will only carry out duties subordinate to powerful men. Though clever in council, he will always hide what he is thinking. He will be anxious, worried over all life's duties, and filled with superstitious awe in all religious rites, suspicious of others, and hesitating even in small decisions.

At this point Firmicus explains how to compute the Lots, which are marked on the chart by small circles. The distance between different planets is added to or subtracted from the Ascendant. The aspects, positions, relationships to the signs and so on are then considered. Calculating the Lot of Parents yields the information that, while the Duke of Edinburgh may be allowed personal charm and grace, the Queen will be low-class, hardworking, ill-kempt and mournful, always sluggish and hesitating, a slave or at least given to servile habits and appearance.

After long consideration of the Lots of Brothers, Wives and Children I can only reveal that his children will be by one wife only and that many will die. Charles could be expected to have one sister, thanks to the Moon, but Mars and Saturn might kill her off. We can anticipate that he will have some problems in the head, from the ages of fifteen and thirty, but that they will be moderated by Venus. In general, the predictions are vague and cancel each other out. I will leave out consideration of the Lots of sexual desires, necessity, honours, military affairs, travel, reputation, physical courage, possessions, accusations, enemies, friends, glory and slaves.³⁹

From the Time-Lords we can tell something of Charles's immediate future. A new cycle of Time-Lords began on Charles's forty-fourth birthday, 14 November 1992. Until 14 June 1994, the Sun rules, bringing ill luck, especially as it is in aspect to Saturn and Mars in a nocturnal chart. The bad news is that the Sun is followed by Saturn for the next thirty months. During this time he threatens

pestilence and death. From 14 December 1996 for a year Jupiter takes over and brings better luck for a year, bestowing 'peaceful good fortune together with the happiest kind of life so that all traces of evil are washed away'. Losses are made good, health is restored, and difficulties end. Then Mars disturbs this serenity until 14 March 1999, bringing the greatest dangers and constant calamities; he 'indicates loss of income and extreme poverty; stirs up frequent law suits and quarrels; and also brings about pains in the eyes and serious dangers'. Then, until Charles's birthday in that year, Venus 'brings prosperity in all affairs; but she excites the character of wives with a certain malevolent dissension, so that a concealing mind in the wife both betrays and then covers itself. Because of this lawsuits are stirred up, and small riots.' Until 14 July 2001 Mercury 'indicates frequent business activities and continual profit, but the profit comes only after labour and danger'. The final part of the Sun's rule as Time-Lord is allotted to the Moon, until 14 August 2003. 'At this time the whole life of the native is disturbed in a variety of ways; whatever he has collected up to this time he loses again; his life will be changeable so that he will be relieved of money by sudden riches, but will lose them again and poverty will follow.'⁴⁰

The last two books, concerned with specific sorts of charts such as those of infants who are left to die, twins and slaves, and with the fixed stars north and south of the zodiac, or *paranatellonta*, offer fewer specific predictions. We do learn a little more about the family. According to two different methods, either his father will die first or his mother. (The Sun is worse located than the Moon, implying that the father will die first, but if you count the number of signs from the Moon to the Sun, you end up in a feminine sign, suggesting that the mother will survive.)⁴¹ He will have five moderately prosperous siblings.⁴² His wife will be well-born but known for adultery.⁴³ In fact, following a method for which Firmicus will not vouch, he will have four or eight wives, beginning at the age of ten, or twenty-two, or thirty-four. (This is worked out by counting the signs from Venus to the Place or the Lot of Marriage for the number and using the total of all the degrees of all the planets as an arc of distance from the Lot of Marriage, and checking when Jupiter reaches the sign.) Before then, if marriage took place it would be dissolved.⁴⁴

Firmicus often points out that the whole body of the data must be considered. For instance, at the end of the sixth book, after discussion of the Time-Lords, he says: 'I do not wish individual sentences to be

quoted out of context. For often if a benefic planet receives the allotted time but has a malefic planet with him, or in square aspect, or in opposition, the favourable quality of his predictions is lessened.'⁴⁵ Thus, after the amassing of the relevant predictions, work remains to be done.

DOROTHEUS OF SIDON

In using Dorotheus' text, I have combined predictions under headings with a bit more creative input, in order to present a more processed horoscope. There are some key differences in his approach. He values the Places differently, in a more hierarchical way which also produces more optimistic predictions. However, in the case of this chart, the arrangement puts Venus in an evil location, which alters the interpretation. He seems to use the first, fourth, seventh and tenth Places as cardines rather than calculating more precisely. He also gives pre-eminence to a particular set of factors, the triplicities of signs and their rulers. For instance, Aries, Leo and Sagittarius are a triplicity, and its lords by day are the Sun, then Jupiter, then Saturn, and by night Jupiter, then the Sun and then Saturn. Dorotheus also calculates some of the Lots in a different way from Firmicus.

Length of life

In the third book Dorotheus offers several different methods of finding the 'governor and indicator of the time of the years of life'. Much is left unexplained, but it is apparent that instead of narrowing down the options he is actually ensuring that there is no preferred planet. A generous interpretation would allow one to conclude from one passage that the governor of life's years was the Moon, though it is not clear that it fulfils all the many requirements.⁴⁶ Even if it were possible to be sure, it is impossible to work through Dorotheus' own method of calculations without tables of rising times such as he would have used. Basically, the procedure is to take the chosen degree and see what the situation is each time the degree moves into aspect with the malefic planets, Saturn and Mars.

Dorotheus' procedure for calculating the length of life is not unusual in being so complicated. Ptolemy's methods in the *Tetrabiblos* have proved the despair of many a commentator.⁴⁷ There is spherical trigonometry involved in the computations, but this would

not be too difficult, provided the astrologer had access to tables such as those in the *Almagest*. But then, five different methods are offered for choosing the *aphetēs*, literally the place of sending out, the place from which to begin.

One can perhaps find a reason for making it difficult to understand methods of calculating the length of life. This was an illegal pursuit, after all, carrying heavy penalties. But it was also the part of the astrological art most must have burned to master. Few could have gained any insight into the forbidden knowledge from reading the astrological treatises which have come down to us.

Dorotheus is no more enlightening about the manner of death. He offers at least five different methods. The ruler of death could be Jupiter or Mars, or Saturn, the Moon, Jupiter again, or Mars. In the first case, if it is Mars, as the lord of the triplicity of Pisces, this means that thieves will fall on Charles and kill him, or his enemies will kill him in a fight, or he will burn in a fire, or an animal from among the earthly animals will bite him or lions will devour him. Because Mars is not in his Place the death will take place in a foreign land. In the last case, even if it is Mars, it could be Saturn which would determine death in this nativity, as lord of the seventh Place, in which case, because it is seen in the East, it suggests that Charles will die publicly. Concentrating on the seventh sign, Charles will die by water, since it is in Aquarius. If we accept that the Moon is moving away from a degree which aspects the Sun (it is now 22 degrees away), then this is reinforced: he will die (in fire or) in water, and many people will die with him.⁴⁸

Upbringing

He will not be left in the open to die since Jupiter is in a cardine and the Moon in the ninth Place by night. While he is a baby he will have quite an attractive face and limbs, and his teething will take place without too much pain.⁴⁹

Afflictions

Saturn is the lord of the sixth house, and will produce afflictions of a dry, cold nature. According to the method of using the Lot of Diseases, Mars will rule, and as the Lot is in Aries, chronic illness will strike in the head. It will be in the left side of the head, because no planets are found between the tenth Place and the Place of Life.

By another method it will be Venus which rules, and because it is northern, the illness will strike in old age.⁵⁰

Character

Dorotheus gives Charles a chequered character. Because Saturn is following a cardine, he will be reflective and anxious, ugly, malicious and haughty, though Jupiter's conjunction with Mars improves matters.⁵¹ The Mercury-Moon opposition makes him timid about public speaking.⁵² With Mercury in the terms and house of Mars he will be an insignificant fool, a shameless liar, neither believing in religion nor good works, and fond of adultery. He may act treacherously and consort with magicians. He will receive hostility from the people on the grounds that he is an untrustworthy reprobate.⁵³ Mercury under the Earth in aspect to Saturn makes him a vicious liar.⁵⁴ But the fact that Mars is in the terms of Mercury (in the system we have in Firmicus) means that he will be reasonable, keen to marry, clear-thinking and intelligent.⁵⁵ He will be reserved and fond of a quiet life, bookish, with an indistinct manner of speaking, with Saturn in the house of Mercury.⁵⁶

But thanks to his handsome face and eyes, he is pleasing and agreeable to all, as the Moon is in the house and terms of Venus.⁵⁷ The Jupiter-Mars conjunction in Jupiter's house makes him powerful, steadfast and celebrated in arms.⁵⁸ And the Saturn-Mercury sextile indicates that he will be quite calm, purposeful and reasonable, and moderately accomplished in literature and numeracy.⁵⁹ The Venus-Mars combination usually implies dubious sexual activity, and the fact that it is a sextile means that he will be quite wealthy, not bad at riding, and successful in his endeavours, 'except that he will' love intercourse with women and riding forbidden mounts(1).⁶⁰

Social status, occupation

To begin with the bad news: with Jupiter and the Sun as the lords of the triplicities of the degree of the conjunction, Charles is destined to be a slave, since Jupiter is conjunct with Mars and in aspect to Saturn. The Moon does lessen the evils of his position,⁶¹ and like his father, he will have only one owner. (A different method gives no owners.)⁶² All the indications of the Moon on the third day and its dodecatemorian are for the humblest social estate.⁶³ Furthermore, the lord of the triplicity of the Sun's sign (Jupiter) is more than

45 degrees after the preceding cardine, so that Charles will be needy and miserable.⁶⁴ According to the rulers of the triplicity of the Moon, his condition will degenerate as his life goes on;⁶⁵ in fact he will fall from property and status because of Saturn's position and sect.⁶⁶ Because of Saturn's position, even if his work is good, he will not get thanks and praise from everybody, indeed someone whom he has never harmed will treat him as an enemy. If he is a king, his people will fight each other and be destroyed. But the fact that Mercury is in the cardine under the Earth (the IC) in the aspect of the malefics, suggests that he will actually be a magician, or at least a thief.⁶⁷ But the rulers of the triplicity of the Lot of Fortune bring happier tidings. He will make a good and praiseworthy living from strangers,⁶⁸ but as this is a nocturnal chart, and no nocturnal planets aspect the Lot of Livelihood, this will only happen after delay and despair.⁶⁹ The rulers of the cardines indicate a middling livelihood.⁷⁰ For instance, with Venus in the terms of Jupiter he should work as a steward for women and amass some wealth thereby.⁷¹ And because a benefic and malefics aspect the Moon he will attain some nobility and status, though he will be miserable.⁷²

The trine aspects do however offer grander potential. He may direct city affairs, or landed estates, or be a busy judge. He will benefit from strangers and be lucky and held in honour.⁷³ Indeed he will be friends with kings, and loved by them.⁷⁴ The Moon-Jupiter trine will give him praise, rank and status.⁷⁵ This is backed up by the Saturn-Moon trine, though diminished by the fact that the Moon is waning.⁷⁶ With Mars and Jupiter the prediction for his political and judicial role in the local community is reinforced, and because they are in the latter's house, he will be powerful and celebrated in arms, and should ascend to the nobility and be a commander of armies.⁷⁷ Because of the trine between Saturn and Jupiter, he will acquire a lot of property, land, trees, buildings and temples. There is a cryptic rider to this prediction: sometimes he will be lord of a group and agree with his father.⁷⁸ There are also predictions of moderate success. Mercury with the Sun will make him gentle, a scribe, with status for his culture and reasoning, and a chief who will benefit others.⁷⁹ Also Mercury may make him a scientist or mathematician, but this could lead to his downfall.⁸⁰ With Jupiter in a double sign and Mercury and the Sun in the IC the indications as to whether he will have more or less property than his father are ambiguous.⁸¹ In general, there is one more helpful observation to add: the Moon will drive off evil for twenty-five years because it is in a cardine in a feminine sign.⁸²

Family

He will be the eldest of the children (there are no planets between the ruler of the triplicity and the Ascendant and no malefic and benefic between the Ascendant and Midheaven). Another two will be born because of the presence of Saturn and Venus between the Ascendant and the IC, but the second will die because of Saturn's being a malefic.⁸³ Because the Ascendant is in Leo, Charles will have few siblings. Mercury, being in the terms of Mars and in opposition to the Moon, will harm them: they either will not get on, or will be sickly, and will probably die.⁸⁴ But more optimistic predictions are available by using Lots rather than Places, since the Lot is opposite Venus in a sign of middling fertility, and in aspect to Jupiter. However, according to this method, one of the siblings will be estranged, as Mars, the lord of the Lot, is not in aspect.⁸⁵ Counting the number of planets which aspect another Lot (of the number of siblings?) gives five. Dorotheus also mentions the method of counting the number of planets under the Earth in a nocturnal nativity, a procedure which here yields the figure of six. There will be at least one sibling of each sex. And at least one sibling will have no good in him or her, or have sicknesses, or there will be enmity between this sibling and the others. Owing to the fact that neither Saturn nor the luminaries are in their houses, Charles will have siblings who are not his friends or have no use for him, probably the older brothers and the older sister.⁸⁶

The fate of the father is determined first of all by the condition of the Sun. Since the luminary is in a good Place, and in the terms of Jupiter, Charles's father will be of good lineage and better livelihood, but he will lose his property and honour, because, though Mars, the first lord of the Sun's triplicity, is in a good position, Venus, the second lord, is in an evil position.⁸⁷ Using Dorotheus' method of calculating the Lot of the Father, good indications of the father's standing and character are reinforced. The mother is also noble in origin, but has gone down in the world, thanks to Venus, the second lord of her triplicity. Dorotheus' method of calculating the Lot puts her in a bad position. But it looks as if she will manage to double her property, as the Moon is in a good Place, aspected by benefics and malefics. If so, Charles will lose some of his.⁸⁸ The father will die before the mother, thanks to the Sun's position under the Earth. In fact he will die and Charles will inherit from him at the age of eight years and one month, as Saturn transits the Lot of the Father and Jupiter is within a cardine.⁸⁹

Because the first lord of the triplicity of Venus is in the terms of Mars, under the Earth and not in his Place, aspected by Saturn, Charles will never marry.⁹⁰ But Venus is in her house, which indicates marriage abundant in children.⁹¹ Yet taking into account that it is in a tropical sign, this could mean that there will be more than one wife. However, the fact that there is only one planet between Midheaven and Venus contradicts this, and because it is Saturn, suggests coldness and distress.⁹² The bad Place in which Venus is found makes it clear that the marriage will be disgraceful.⁹³ Because the ruler of the Place of Wedding is on the edge of the second Place, the problem results from the involvement of fathers, mature men, or the dead.⁹⁴ Or, if we are to prefer the indication of Mercury, he will escape all misery and misfortune on account of women.⁹⁵ Since the ruler of the Lot of Wedding aspects the Moon, he will marry from among his relatives, probably his nieces, at least for one of his three wives.⁹⁶ His relationships with women could be good all his life, or take a dramatic turn for the worse in middle age, before improving again, thanks to the lords of the triplicity of Venus.⁹⁷ The best prediction is from Venus' being in Jupiter's terms: he will have power and property from his wife or his wife's work, and he will love her with a powerful love and be happy.⁹⁸

Thanks to the lords of Jupiter's triplicity, in the first part of his life he will have less joy from children than in the middle part, but disaster later.⁹⁹ Taking Jupiter as the main lord of his own triplicity, and counting the signs between his house above the Earth (Aquarius) and the Ascendant, we find that Charles will have five children. But the number should be increased because of the presence of the Moon in the signs, and doubled twice because there are two double-bodied signs (Pisces and Gemini): yielding the number of twenty-four or more.¹⁰⁰ The Lot of Children, in Aries, offers another possibility. From the Lot to its lord there are four signs, so four children. The opposition of Venus to the Lot, and the lack of malefics in the relevant signs, indicate that all four will live. But Jupiter in a sterile sign denies children, and Mercury in Scorpio offers plenty but guarantees many deaths as well.¹⁰¹ There is also a Lot of Transit for Children, which indicates when they will be born, and Lots of Male and Female Children. These are in Virgo and Aquarius respectively, and from their lords we should estimate that there will be more female children, though Saturn's position is ambiguous.¹⁰² Dorotheus' efforts to sum up his doctrines on the number of children only add to the confusion:

Now I will make the whole thing clear to you. If you find in nativities Jupiter and Mercury not injured, then judge an abundance of children. If these two are not in their illuminator [the Sun] or their dejection, then they do not indicate the existence of children, but if he should have a child, then he will die and grief will reach his father.¹⁰³

The indications are imprecise, because, though they are not in bad Places, Jupiter is injured by the conjunction with Mars, and Mercury could be seen as under the Sun's rays. Dorotheus then turns to the Place of Children for the first time, and produces the final observation: 'if one benefic aspects the Place, then you should not at all despair for his children, but he will have some.' (!)¹⁰⁴

This section on children well exemplifies the problems evident throughout the process of interpreting the horoscope. We already saw the difficulties in following calculations of the length of life, which could conceivably be explained by the sensitivity of the subject. But in the case of children, or any of the other topics, there is no such problem. Why should the astrologers go out of their way to offer so many incompatible methods for answering any single question? Firmicus takes care to say that no one indication should be taken out of context. But the difficulty of processing Dorotheus' various predictions shows that it is too easy to think in terms of 'tempering the hot with the cold', as Firmicus put it, meaning balancing negative with positive answers. There is no way of balancing the different predictions of the number of children so as to produce a final answer.

AN ANCIENT PARALLEL

The foregoing experiment could be condemned as thoroughly artificial and unconnected with the practice of interpreting horoscopes. Unfortunately, we have only one example of an original horoscope with a full set of interpretations (as opposed to the examples given in treatises) to use for comparisons.¹⁰⁵ Normally there is no interpretation at all, but in two cases there are warnings of danger in particular periods, and in another a remark relating the data to the well-being of the father.¹⁰⁶ In the literary horoscopes, the only interpretations are retrospective, and illustrate how astrological data would have revealed what happened. However, the one full interpretation we have seems to support the results of the 'experiment'.

This horoscope, preserved on papyrus, may well have been found with a set of planetary tables for the years 105–34 CE, which were picked up by the same British collector on a visit to Egypt in 1883–4 (see Plate 11).¹⁰⁷ It is tempting to see this as an astrologer's kit. One element missing, though, would be the water-clock mentioned as having been used in conjunction with the tables. The date of the horoscope is 13 April 95 CE, so the papyrus would be from the second century, assuming that the native is more than five years old. The first part of the horoscope, giving the data and the beginning of the interpretation, is in Greek, but most of the rest is in Old Coptic, an Egyptian language of which there are very few examples. Together with the damaged condition of the papyrus, this has made translation very difficult. However, though not all details are secure, it is clear that the successive periods of life are discussed, in relation to the Time-Lord of each, in the manner in which we have seen them discussed in Firmicus and Dorotheus. It is also clear that there is an exceptionally varied set of data, with references to the houses of the planets, the terms, the dodecatemories, the decans and the 'thirty-six horoscopes' and the Lots. The list of decans is different from any other known, the meaning of 'the thirty-six horoscopes' is unclear but seems to be a second version of the decans, and the Lots are determined by principles peculiar to this papyrus. Thus, we can immediately see that, even in relation to a particular horoscope, there is considerable scope for conflicting data. Furthermore, the peculiarity of the methods supports the view that there was not so much a linear development of astrological theory, but rather scope for individual variations on themes. We shall come back to this point later.

The Greek text has been freely translated as follows by the editors, with the passages in square brackets conjectured:

The first period Venus rules up to six [years nine (?) months twenty-five days. Its position in Lot One, Agathos Daimōn, indicates well being and abundance] of pleasure. If he is a slave [he will be set free; if he is poor he will become] rich; if he is rich he will become richer and [whatever slaves] he is master of will increase, as the nativity indicates; and [his crops (?) of whatever sort they are] will do well; and the children from whatever union born will have inborn in them a fine nature like their parents. And he will have excellent associations extending everywhere. He will suffer from cold or fevers or other

illnesses; such are the things that Mars portends, . . . Venus is in Epanaphora (the second Place). And Saturn is in trine to Venus (and portends that) he will be cold as regards women. He will be tried before the magistrate for unspeakable associations . . . he will suffer miserably and will live a miserable life abroad. For the first Lot is a separation (?), the second likewise a separation (?) and the third likewise a separation (?).

This could very easily have been extracted directly from a treatise in the way I used them to interpret Prince Charles's horoscope. There has been no attempt to adapt them to the circumstances of the native, who must be a child at this point in his life, if we are really dealing with periods of life. At any rate, a variety of occupations and stations in life are envisaged. Furthermore, no attempt is made to deal with the apparent contradiction of the favourable predictions from Venus and the unfavourable ones at the end, presumably from Saturn.

In the surviving parts of the horoscope that follow, though there is doubt about details and parts missing, it seems obvious that the native's life is described as a roller-coaster ride of ups and downs whose succession is highly implausible. If we consider the question of his marriage, for instance, having heard that he will be cold to women, we find that in the second period he may neglect his wife or be at odds with her, and then that she will 'burn to the hair' (?). In the next period (roughly twenty years beginning from thirty-four), it seems that his heart will become good through a woman, but then that he will be shamed by one, then that he will have one (presumably as a wife) until year 94, and next that he will see a wife's death or be parted from her. Then (after taking counsel from a woman) his heart will become good for a wife. The last surviving column is very fragmentary, but there seem to be more references to his heart becoming good for a woman, his taking a wife, and to the wife's leaving him. Moreover, if we take the issue of children, who have already been described as of good character, in the third period (roughly ten years beginning from twenty-four), we see that his children may misbehave, or he will part from them on mercantile business, and a child 'will not come to him for ever' (presumably meaning 'will not be born'). Later we learn that he will be given a child in year 42. Thus, though there are difficulties with this text, it seems evident that we have here something very similar to the compilation of predictions that I made, though in this case only concerning the periods of life. The whole is riddled with contradictions.

ANCIENT ASTROLOGY
SOME EXPLANATIONS

Models of learning

We need to look empathetically at what the astrologers might be doing in offering this morass of contradictions. To do this, it is vital to explore the context within which astrological teaching took place. Unfortunately we have little evidence from other sources about specifically astrological instruction. Vettius Valens is rare in mentioning the existence of pupils, and in referring to his efforts to instruct them in relation to his treatise.¹⁰⁸ Thus, to infer the nature of the context, we have to rely on the treatises themselves, and on other evidence about education in general, and the role played by treatises in instruction.

The process which I have just gone through in using the ancient works to interpret a particular horoscope was one of self-instruction. Beginning as an ignorant novice, I took the prescriptions of the books literally, as best as I could. It was a humiliating experience since, at every turn, new ideas which had not been explained seemed to appear. At each point there were doubts about the meaning of the instructions offered. Furthermore, whenever certainty seemed to have been achieved, it was eliminated by new instructions.

There are reflections of this uncertainty in some other ancient sources, which suggest that it was not simply my personal inadequacy as an interpreter which was at stake in this experiment. A good place to start in considering ancient education is Plato, since it is in his works that we first find sustained consideration of the topic, and since his influence on later antiquity was profound.

Plato's *Seventh Letter* contrasts the dialectic method of teaching, which is exemplified by Socrates' personal, interactive mode of instruction, with that afforded by the written word. Words can only offer a shallow form of teaching; they cannot convey ultimate truths.¹⁰⁹ In fact, it is not certain that this is a genuine work, but it certainly attempts to reflect Platonic ideas. In Plato's dialogue, the *Phaedrus*, writing gets little credit. Socrates relates the story of the reception of the new invention of writing. Theuth, Plato's version of the Egyptian god Thoth, who was identified with Hermes, and later Mercury, makes great claims for the new wisdom offered by his invention, but the Egyptian king dismisses these claims. Socrates goes on to expand the king's judgement. Writing cannot provide anything trustworthy or long-lasting:

ASTROLOGICAL PRACTICE: CASTING A HOROSCOPE

You might think that they [words] are speaking as if they were intelligent, but if you ask them something about what they have said, in the hope of learning, they just communicate the same single thing for ever.

This is indeed exactly the experience of the novice reader faced with the astrological treatise purporting to offer instruction. But Plato has a further objection to the effect of putting speech into writing. For him, not everybody is worthy to receive knowledge. He continues:

Once it is written down, all speech circulates everywhere with no discrimination as to audience, equally among the wrong people, and it does not understand to whom it should speak, and to whom it shouldn't.

This is why instruction can only take place within a dialogue, which a book can never offer. Plato portrays the written word as a living creature in order to make his point: 'In a state of confusion, and unjustly reviled, it [the written word] requires the assistance of its father, for it is not able to defend or help itself on its own.' What he means here, is that to learn anything there must be communication with the author of the thoughts concerned.¹¹⁰

Indeed, ancient learning of any craft, or *technē*, would take place in the form of an apprenticeship. It is because of this, as well as thanks to the influence of Plato, that it became proverbial to say that one cannot pilot by the book: that is, one cannot learn to steer a ship (like any other practical skill) from books.¹¹¹ This is a frequent phrase in the works of Galen, the great medical author of the second century. In his writings expounding techniques such as those of reading the pulse, he frequently stresses the need for long years of instruction.¹¹² The doctor's apprentices would follow him to the bedsides of patients to learn their trade. Galen is scathing about those who hope to teach themselves.¹¹³ Astrology too is a craft, and only long apprenticeship allows the experience to make the fine judgements needed.

But there is a tension in writers like Plato and Galen, because, despite their professed need for a very rare sort of reader of their works, and their presentation of the works as records of oral instruction, they publish them. Hence they allow them to circulate to everybody, and, at least in Galen's case, advertise their writings as offering knowledge.

All the didactic texts of antiquity share the problem of communicating through the rigidity of the written form. However, this

problem is not enough to account for the difficulties they present to the reader. It is not simply the problem faced by the modern reader of a manual explaining the use of a gadget such as a video-recorder, for instance. Ancient authors seem to share an attitude to learning, which we have seen in Plato, namely, that not everybody deserves to learn. Knowledge becomes more valuable precisely because few can acquire it.

The model for learning here was initiation into the mystery cults. Most famous in the Greek world were the Mysteries of Eleusis, a village near Athens, but there were a whole host of other cults, including some associated with Dionysus and others with Orpheus or Pythagoras, whose secrets could only be revealed to initiates.¹¹⁴ Revelation of the secrets was forbidden on pain of death, though allusions were permitted. Each initiate had his guide, his mystagogue. Writers of astrological treatises sometimes seem to see themselves as mystagogues. This model is not confined to astrologers: Galen recommends that the secrets of anatomy which he reveals should be approached like the mysteries.¹¹⁵ But the astrologers who saw themselves as being in the Hermetic tradition were particularly keen on the analogy. Those who had undergone initiation into the mysteries swore an oath never to speak of their experience. Vettius Valens is one astrological author who emphasises the model of the mysteries frequently:

I adjure you, most honoured brother, and all those being initiated into this systematic art, learning of the starry bowl of the heavens, and the zodiac and sun and moon and of the five planets, and also of foreknowledge and holy necessity, to keep all these things hidden, and not to share them with the uninitiated, except those who are worthy to keep and receive them rightly.¹¹⁶

Firmicus employs the same device. The authors of the treatises, in demanding an oath of their readers, were deliberately evoking the oral context, though they were obviously using the written medium. Here he specifically recalls Pythagoreans and Neoplatonists:

When Orpheus initiated strangers into his mysteries, he required nothing of them but an oath – an oath backed by the fearful authority of religion – that the rites would not be betrayed to profane ears. It is generally agreed that Plato also was concerned that the cherished concepts of his secret

discourses should not be revealed to the untaught. Pythagoras, too, and our Porphyry believed that their ideas should be enshrined in religious silence. Therefore, following the rule of these men, my dear Mavortius, I beg you to take an oath . . .¹¹⁷

Firmicus' stated interest is that wicked men should not be initiated, since he is attempting to put astrology on the highest moral ground.¹¹⁸ But the model of initiation is also appropriate in that it suggests stages of learning. The importance of this is particularly clear in Firmicus, who orders his work in stages. Thus the chart is divided into smaller and smaller units as the explication progresses. First there is the simple division by the four cardinal points, then there is the Eight Place system, then the Twelve Places, then the Lots, and then the *Sphaera Barbarica*, which deals with degrees. Finally he offers a glimpse of the next stage, which is beyond the confines of the book, in which minutes of degrees are considered:

But, my dear Lollianus, do not look for [the theory of] myriogenesis in these books. When my meagre talent with the help of favourable powers has finished this book, I will write for you in twelve other books the secrets of that teaching. For now everything must be learnt step by step, for we cannot reach myriogenesis by any other way except that our minds have first grasped the secrets of the beginnings of the art.

Elsewhere he says: 'I have reserved for another time the explanation of the myriogenesis.'¹¹⁹

But the result of setting up successive stages in this way is that each new stage appears to cancel out the one before. Thus any answers achieved by using the system of the Eight Places are replaced by answers generated by the Twelve Place system, which are in turn replaced by the Lot system. But no one system is given priority over the others. For the novices, the process of learning is humiliating, since every time they learn to operate a system, they find that their answers seem invalidated by another procedure. It is typical of the didactic method as revealed in texts that nothing is explained. Such texts seem designed to ensure that the dangers caused by the apparently egalitarian distribution of teaching through writing are kept at bay. True, everyone who can read the texts can extract the information contained in them, but without the guidance afforded to the few, they cannot use that information.

Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* became the most popular astrological treatise in antiquity, but it explained even less than the others. Ptolemy rarely gives details, avoids illustrations, and talks in the most general terms. No one could have had a hope of interpreting a horoscope as a result of reading this work. Yet it was appreciated as the work of a master. Ptolemy does not apologise for the lack of precision: he points to the difficulties, drawing attention to the yawning chasm of knowledge between the novice and the master:

Such are the effects produced by the several planets, each by itself and in command of its own nature. Associated, however, now with one, now with another, in the different aspects, by the exchange of signs and by their phases with reference to the sun, and experiencing a corresponding tempering of their powers, each produces a character, in its effect, which is the result of the mixture of the natures that have participated, and is complicated. It is of course a hopeless and impossible task to mention the proper outcome of every combination and enumerate absolutely all the aspects of whatever kind since we can conceive of such a variety of them. Consequently questions of this kind are best left to the enterprise and ingenuity of the astrologer, in order to make the distinctions.¹²⁰

No guidance at all is given on how to manage the enormous mass of contradictory data. Indeed, stress is often laid on the importance of each new variable as it appears. There could have been some rules laid down to set out a hierarchy of importance. In the discipline of physiognomics, the art of judging the character and sometimes the destiny from the physique, for instance, rules are set out ordering the parts of the body in order of significance for interpretative purposes. Examples of how to deal with contradictions are sometimes given.¹²¹

The success of Ptolemy's book suggests that the role of the text which presented itself as a manual was not to teach its readers. It was rather a polished product to be admired by the dilettante, as a masterly exposition of the art. Such works are very often dedicated to patrons who simply have a cultured interest in the subject. Of course, some works were more technical than others. Vettius Valens, who offered so many horoscopes as illustrations, and claimed to address his pupils, was aiming at a more specialist audience than Manilius, who aimed to impress his courtly audience as much by his skill in versifying such difficult subject-matter as by his skill in

horoscopy. But no treatise offered sufficient information to allow a novice reader to compute and interpret a horoscope.

Models of mastery

The didactic text reveals the gulf between master and pupil, while giving the impression of progress towards the unattainable goal. It also reveals the essence of mastery of the art concerned. There are two arenas of intellectual life in the ancient world which are important here. The first, which we have considered, is the master-pupil relationship, and the second is the *agōn*, or public debate. Nietzsche thought that the 'agonal spirit' was the driving-force of Greek civilisation, and many have concurred with this verdict since.¹²² From the earliest period of which we have evidence, the *agōn*, or competition, was a fundamental part of Greek life. In the Homeric epics, competitions, which were ceremonially staged on occasions of ritual importance, were athletic. However, even in this era, there were two arenas in which the Homeric hero could distinguish himself, and the second was in the assembly, in public debate. By the times of the Roman empire, there were *agōnes*, or publicly staged competitions, in many areas apart from sport, in physical beauty, arts and crafts, song and dance, dramatic performance, and most importantly, in disputation. The *agōn* was fundamental in Greek education; from earliest childhood, the Greek would have to compete in public. But the public displays put on by the most famous intellectuals, known as sophists, were the culmination of this long training. Most celebrated were contests in epideictic, or display oratory. But the model of this kind of display spread far beyond its traditional form, in which contestants might be asked to treat a theme from Greek history or mythology, such as: What did Alexander say to his troops when they reached the edge of the known world? This competitive display spread into medicine, for example. One chronicler of the exploits of the sophists includes discussion of the best-known member of a group of doctors who were known as 'iatrosophists' or doctor-sophists, in the fourth century, a group who spent as much time learning to speak about their art as practising it. Magnus of Antioch used his rhetorical training to win *agōnes* by arguing that his opponents' patients were still unwell, even though the patients themselves were thanking the other doctors for the wonderful job they had done.¹²³ This story, of course, exaggerates his talents, and should be set against a number of anecdotes which illustrate the paradoxical powers of rhetoric.

However, we know from inscriptions that there were such contests. At the Asclepeia, a festival in Ephesus celebrating the god of medicine, doctors competed in four branches of *agōn*, including surgery and something to do with medical instruments, as well as speaking on themes prepared and unprepared.¹²⁴

The style and atmosphere of the formal ceremonial *agōn*, which offered a kind of spectator-sport in the field of speaking, were transferred to the public disputes in which exponents of a variety of disciplines engaged. We know that there were such disputes in fields like dream-interpretation and augury, and the rules are quite clear. Galen describes one such dispute between diviners from birds, one an Arab and one a Greek, and makes his judgement. Unsurprisingly, since the rules were Greek, he decides in favour of the Greek. What impresses him is the ability to draw on the expertise of past masters of the art, and above all to draw the most subtle distinctions. 'I recognised that the Arab was lacking in the ability to make distinctions', he says, 'while the Greek was accomplished in making distinctions and a master of the art.'¹²⁵ The Greek word for master of the art is *technicos*, that is, experienced in the *technē*. The didactic texts we have are often known as *technai*, the plural of *technē*, because they were expositions of the *technai* concerned. And the mark of the *technē* was the subtlety of distinctions drawn. It is easy to see how this would have evolved in the context of agonistic display. We do not have any accounts of actual public debates between ancient astrologers, but one modern account of astrologers in Madagascar reveals what must have been the essential feature. The anthropologist Maurice Bloch describes his experience of a debate conducted at one remove:

When I went to one man of importance and then went to another for information, the second would immediately ask what the first had told me, and would then go on to elaborate further, to the admiration of all present.¹²⁶

He also describes a proper competitive debate, which took place at a wedding. The feature of this dispute, whose original point must have been to determine how the couple's horoscopes would interact to affect their marriage, was that neither of the rival astrologers was much concerned about the answers to the question. Instead, the competition was about proving one's knowledge of the most elaborate version.

In this context, it is easy to see how so many rival doctrines would

be invented to deal with the same problem. Astrologers would be constantly forced to cap their rivals with more complex doctrines. The creative input would be in using the relatively simple elements of astrology in endlessly differing new ways, as the competitive context demanded. We can see this in Artemidorus' treatise on dream-interpretation, dedicated to his son. He warns him: 'If you give a bare, simple explanation, you'll appear inexperienced', and claims that he has made subtle distinctions which cannot be refuted. He is quite open about the influence of the agonistic context, advising his son to use the technique of the anagram when he wanted to appear more knowledgeable in contests with other dream-interpreters, but not for the practice of the art, as it is useless.¹²⁷

Though there are no explicit allusions to contests in Firmicus, for instance, the mark of this model of display is clear in his text. The debating style is visible in his exaggerated insistence on the significance of particular techniques, such as that of the 90th degree: 'The use of this degree seems unknown to many, and is only lightly treated by a few writers. The tract of Petosiris on the subject seems to me to betray a hostile prejudice and attempt to conceal the concept.' He claims that everything can be discovered from this degree, but never explains how, nor discusses it thereafter.

In part, the fear of being seen to lack knowledge of any particular technique leads to the desire to include everything. Thus Firmicus justifies the detail in which he explains the meaning of the planets in different signs: 'I shall discuss this in detail so that a malicious reader may not be able to say to you that we have left anything out.'¹²⁸ At the end of the book he claims proudly that nothing has been left out from the traditions handed down by the ancients. In a context where the chief method of challenge is going to be that a further complication has been ignored, it is not surprising that contradiction between competing interpretations is not a worry. Instead, new techniques are offered with pride: thus, immediately after describing one method for dating marriage: 'There is a more subtle way of discovering this.'¹²⁹ Dorotheus feels compelled to include techniques that he does not endorse: 'There are some experts who consider in a diurnal nativity how many planets are above the earth.'¹³⁰

SUMMARY

In this chapter we have seen what would happen if the treatises were taken at face value and used to interpret a particular horoscope. What

emerged was that the treatises could not teach anyone how to cast and interpret a horoscope. To any one question, a large number of contradictory responses was available, and there were no clues as to how to choose between them. This finding demanded an explanation. Rather than assume that this was the result of corrupt texts or the stupidity of the astrologers, the normal explanations for apparent confusion in astrological texts, I looked to the contemporary intellectual context. I suggested that different ideals and methods of education were operating. The process of learning was an apprenticeship, and it was akin to a process of initiation, like the mystery cults which were so important in the Greek world. The stages of initiation, in which each new level displaced the last, could explain the apparent reduplication of methods for finding out about any one matter. Furthermore, on analogy with other fields of knowledge, didactic texts were not the means of teaching, but rather of displaying knowledge. Secondly, I pointed to the importance of the institution of the *agōn*, or public debate, in Greco-Roman intellectual culture. Here too was a possible explanation for reduplication – in such a context, the most important thing was to be able to find a more elaborate explanation than an opponent could.

In this chapter something of the social world of the astrologers emerged in the predictions for the horoscope. In the next, we shall examine this world more closely, attempting to delineate it and locate it in space and time. We will be returning to the idea of the *technē*, and looking at how this genre of writing affected the astrologers' reflections of the world.

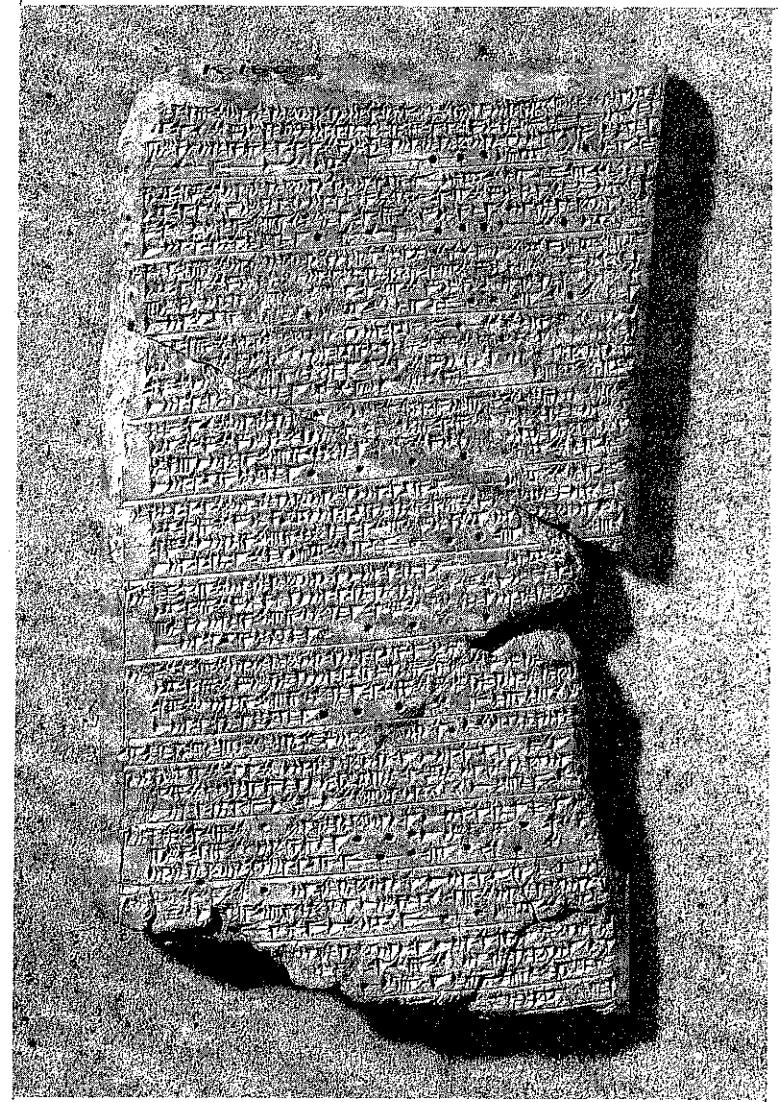


Plate 1 Venus Tablet of Ammisaduqa, a seventh-century BCE version of observations which are probably of the seventeenth century BCE. Copyright British Museum.