ANCIENT HOUSE DIVISION

by

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Recent books on the subject of house division (Holden, *The Elements of House Division*; and Lorenz, *Tools of astrology – Houses*) have not adequately covered its early history. This paper contains a brief discussion of the historical background and an outline of the development of houses and house division during the classical period.

Origin of Horoscopic Astrology

Classical Western astrology was a Hellenistic invention. To borrow Hollywood terminology, it was produced by a Greek company on location in Alexandria, Egypt, based on an idea of the Babylonians. Its time of origin would appear to be the 2nd century B.C. The loss of the earliest books, which survive only in scattered quotations, makes it difficult to be more precise.

A substantial number of Babylonian astronomical texts have survived on clay tablets, enough to enable scholars to understand the main features of Babylonian astronomy and to estimate its degree of accuracy. By contrast, however, Babylonian astrology has left scant remains. The surviving "horoscopes" as edited and translated by Sachs contain a rudimentary listing of planets in signs and a few other phenomena followed by a sentence or two of interpretation. There is no mention of the ASC or the houses. We must therefore assume that these features were unknown to the Babylonian astrologers.

Most of these Babylonian nativities belong to the third century B.C. At this same epoch in Egypt it is known that the time of night was, or could be, determined by observing the rising of the thirty-six asterisms called decans. Since life moved then at a slower pace, it was sufficient to determine the hour. By day the sundial or water clock was used and by night the water-clock or the asterisms themselves. This was an established practice.

Since the Egyptians looked at the rising asterism to get the hour, this is reflected in the name subsequently given to the ASC. In the Greek language it is *horoskopos*, which means literally 'hour-mark – the thing you look at to get the hour. This term may originally have referred only to time and not to astrology. However, the Egyptian asterisms were soon grafted onto the Babylonian zodiac, three to a sign. (This was the origin of

the *decanates*.) Thereafter, if you knew the rising asterism, you knew the rising sign. We can reasonably infer that these asterisms or decans had no astrological signification, for only two of the papyrus horoscopes (GH 81 and 95) mention them, and even they give no interpretation of their meaning.

Babylonian astronomers had observed the actual rising-times of the signs and had calculated two different but similar tables of ascensions for the latitude of Babylon using ingenious methods of numerical progression; nowadays, these two methods are called "System A" and "System B." The ascensions according to System A seem to have been favored by the Alexandrians. Here is the table (Neugebauer, HAMA, 1, 368):

Aries	20°	Pisces
Taurus	24°	Aquarius
Gemini	28°	Capricorn
Cancer	32°	Sagittarius
Leo	36°	Scorpio
Virgo	40°	Libra

This table must have been incorporated into early Greek astrological literature because it reappears in the works of later writers who still had access to the earliest treatises. Vettius Valens (2nd century A.D.) uses it here and there in his *Anthology*, and, not surprisingly, we find it four centuries later in Varahamihira's *Brihatjataka*, 1, 1 9, where the numbers are called "measures of the signs" (V.S. Sastri's translation.) The fact that these "measures" are for the latitude of Babylon (32N33) rather than for the latitude of Ujjain (23N11) is but one of many indications that Indian horoscopic astrology was derived from foreign sources.

About 150 B.C., the Greek mathematician Hypsicles wrote a short treatise called *Anaphorikos* or 'Ascension,' in which he explained the method and explicitly calculated a table of rising-times for the latitude of Alexandria. This table became standard in astrological literature and continued in use to some extent even after the more accurate tables of Claudius Ptolemy became available in the 2nd century A.D. However, as mentioned above, the earlier Babylonian table was not entirely displaced – a testimonial to the strength of tradition. For example, c. A.D. 15 the Roman poet Manilius (*Astronomica*, III, 275-300) gives us the Babylonian table (in "stades" or half-degrees), but forgets to tell us what latitude it is valid for.

In Egypt, time was reckoned from sunrise to sunset (hours of the day) and from sunset to sunrise (hours of the night). Their system was similar to ours with the exception that the day began at sunrise instead of midnight. Thus, "12 o'clock" would have meant "at sunrise" or "at sunset," depending on whether it was the 12th hour of the night or the 12th hour of the day. The hours, however, were of unequal length, being simply one

twelfth of the length of the day or night, which varied with the seasons.

To calculate a horoscope in the early days, the Egyptian astrologer required only a simple ephemeris that gave the sign position of the Sun, Moon, and planets. If the birth was reported as having occurred during the day, he divided the hour by two and counted forward from the Sun sign as many signs as the quotient. For example, given the Sun in Gemini and the birth at the 4th hour of the day. Divide 4 by 2; the quotient is 2. Count 2 signs forward from Gemini; the ASC is Leo. If the birth was at night, the same procedure was followed, but the count began from the sign opposite the Sun. Obviously this was only an approximation, since the signs do not rise in equal periods of time. However, it was convenient, and it was evidently acceptable to many people as we can surmise from the fact that Manilius, *Astronomica*, III, 225 ff., having explained the procedure, points out that it is wrong. More refined procedures took into account the variable length of the hour and the ascensions as shown in the table (Manilius explains the whole thing in elegant Latin verse in Lines 382-485.)

To summarize, by about 150 B.C. the Alexandrian astrologers had several methods available to calculate the rising sign. These varied in accuracy from the rough and ready two hours per sign rule to the more elaborate procedures just mentioned. And to the errors of these methods were added the errors of the "clock." Perhaps one client in two got the correct rising sign.

The Houses

Having moved from Babylon to Alexandria, the *horoscope* had acquired a new element – the rising sign or ASC. It presently occurred to some astrologer that the ASC marked the accidental beginning of a circle analogous to the beginning of the zodiac, for just as the vernal equinox marks the point in the zodiac where the Sun moves from the southern hemisphere to the northern hemisphere, so does the ASC mark the point where all the planets move from below the earth to above the earth. Compare Paul of Alexandria (A.D. 378) *Introduction*, Chapter 2, where, in speaking of the rising of the signs, he repeatedly uses the phrase "The sign rises from the invisible into the visible part of the world. . . .". This was the origin of the houses of the horoscope. They began with the rising sign and were numbered successively in the order of signs. The prime importance of the ASC must be noted here. In the papyrus horoscope of Pitenius (born 1 April 81; GH, 81) occurs the significant phrase "The tiller of them all, the horoscope. . ." Three centuries later Paul wrote (*Introduction*, Chapter 24) ". . . for the ASC is appointed the giver of life and breath, whence it is called tiller." The occurrence of this curious term in an original horoscope prepared for a client and in a textbook written three centuries later would seem to indicate a common origin in some

early standard treatise, perhaps one of the works of Hermes or of Petosiris & Nechepso that now survive only in scattered quotations.

Starting from the rising sign, the houses were numbered off in succession. In the example given above, the first house would have been Leo, the second Virgo, the third Libra, etc. This was the first system of house division. I have not encountered any name for it in the literature, so, for convenience, I shall refer to it as the Sign House system. Note that the reckoning was by whole signs. This means that if the first house was Leo, then the entire sign of Leo constituted the first house, the entire sign of Virgo the second house, and so on. This is the primitive form of Equal House division. It is found in the papyri (GH, pp. 16-75) from the earliest to the latest, and it is still in widespread use in India.

The second system of house division was an obvious modification of the Sign House system. Again the Sun position was noted, but this time the Sun's degree position within its sign was used as the starting point. The arc from Sun to ASC degree was calculated by multiplying the hour of the day by 15. Using the previous example and now supposing the Sun to have been in the 23rd degree of Gemini, we multiply 4 hours times 15 and get 60 degrees; adding this to 23 Gemini, we get 23 Leo for the ASC. (Of course, the variable hour lengths and sign ascensions could be used to gain more precision.)

Now the concept of a cusp appears. Since the astrological houses are analogous to the signs of the zodiac, and since the signs of the zodiac consist of equal 30-degree divisions of the circle, it was logical that the houses should also be equal 30-degree divisions, but measured from the ASC degree instead of from the beginning of the zodiac. The procedure is described in detail c. A.D. 335 by Firmicus Maternus (*Mathesis*, II, 19). This is the system of house division we call Equal House. Like the first system, it is still in use. Modern astrologers often ascribe it to Ptolemy, and, in fact he does refer to it. He was, however, merely describing the system used by his authorities. How far back it goes is difficult to say (1st century B.C.?), but it is worth noting that Ptolemy mentions it in passing without making any comment or offering any alternative method. We can, therefore, reasonably infer that he "approved" it.

The modern astrologer, accustomed to calculating first the RAMC and from it the house cusps, may be puzzled by the emphasis on determining the ASC and the complete lack of mention of the MC. It must be emphasized that the ASC was the cusp of prime importance. In ancient astrology, the MC was calculated from the ASC, not the other way around. This was a natural consequence of reckoning time from sunrise to sunset. However, there is also an important astrological consideration. At the eastern horizon, stars, planets, and degrees of the zodiac that have been invisible under the earth suddenly appear; likewise, at the western horizon, they suddenly disappear. By contrast, at the midheaven, a point on the sphere has reached its highest altitude above the horizon; but this is not particularly impressive. A planet 5 degrees east or west of the meridian.

hardly appears different to the eye. Nothing definite distinguishes the two positions.

To return to the discussion of house division, we have described the origin of the Sign House and Equal House systems. Let us pursue the Equal House system further. As we said above, the zodiac was divided into 30-degree segments beginning with the ASC degree. The cusps of the houses were thus in partile aspect to the ASC degree. In effect, the cusps of the equal houses constitute an aspect ring based on the ASC degree. Also, planets in houses have fixed aspectual relationships with planets in other houses. None of this is true of the quadrant systems to be described later.

Firmicus Maternus, in his discussion of the twelve houses of the horoscope (*Mathesis*, ibid.) makes an interesting observation that leads us into our discussion of the next house system. He notes that the MC degree is often found in the 9th house! This seemingly contradictory statement is easily explained. Suppose the first degree of Cancer is rising in Rome. The equal house cusp of the 10th house is 1 Aries; however, the astronomical midheaven is in Pisces, which is the 9th house. Therefore, the cusp of the 10th house was the "MC" of the system of houses in use, but the astronomical midheaven was recognized as what we would call a "sensitive point." That is to say, it was not a house cusp marker, but only a calculated point like the Part of Fortune. Originally, it had nothing to do with the house cusps!

Sometime between the middle of the 2nd century A.D. and the end of the 3rd century, in other words, between Ptolemy and Porphyry, some astrologers abandoned the Equal House system, in which the cusp of the 10th house was exactly 90 degrees from the ASC degree, and decided that the cusp of the 10th should be the degree of the zodiac that fell upon the meridian. This had the effect of dividing the zodiac into unequal quadrants. No doubt this change arose from a confusion of terms. The earlier practice had been to call the cusp of the 10th house the "midheaven." But astronomers, not concerned with astrology, had defined the same term to mean "culmination." Thus, there were two midheavens. And, since the astronomers were using spherical trigonometry to calculate the (astronomical) midheaven, it must have impressed some astrologers as being more "scientific" than the traditional midheaven, which required no calculation at all (you simply backed off three signs and wrote down the ASC degree number.)

We can assume that arguments raged between the innovators and the traditionalists; and the matter was by no means settled, for both the Equal House and the new quadrant systems survived. We can also see that there was an appeal to authority, for Porphyry (3rd century) attempts to convince his readers that Ptolemy had a quadrant system in mind when he wrote the *Tetrabiblos*. This is certainly false, as a reading of that book will show; for, if it had been true, Porphyry would have been able to cite a specific statement of Ptolemy's to that effect. He could not, so obviously

Ptolemy never discussed a quadrant system of house division. Porphyry was reduced to asserting that Ptolemy had been speaking only of equinoctial signs in his famous chapter 'On the Length of Life' (*Tetrabiblos* III, 10). What is interesting to note is that (1) the idea of quadrant division was controversial, and (2) Porphyry sought to strengthen his side's argument by invoking the great authority.

The new quadrant system of house division is called today the Porphyry system because it is first described in his book *Introduction to the Tetrabiblos*. Whether he was the actual inventor of the system is doubtful. The fact that he criticizes those who advocated a minor variation of the system would seem to indicate that it had been in existence for some time before he wrote, and, in fact, Vettius Valens (*Anthology* III,2) trisects the quadrantal arcs for another purpose and attributes the procedure to the otherwise unknown astrologer Orion. At any rate, it worked like this: you calculated the ASC and the astronomical MC, determined the zodiacal arc between them, and divided it by three; then you measured off that many degrees from the MC and obtained the cusp of the 11th house, a further addition gave you the cusp of the 12th house. A similar procedure determined the cusps in the adjacent quadrant.

So far, so good. Unfortunately, Porphyry remembered that Ptolemy had defined a 30-degree sector from 5 degrees above the cusp of the ASC to 25 degrees below as being a sector in which the Sun or Moon might acquire prorogative force. I don't know why Ptolemy did this, and neither did Porphyry, but he assumes that Ptolemy intended to define all the houses as beginning 5 degrees before the cusp. In point of fact, Ptolemy defined the 1st house in this manner, and then referred to the houses in sextile, square, trine, and opposition to these degrees and above the horizon as being the 11th, 10th, 9th, and 7th houses. Whether he intended this procedure to be used as a general definition of houses or whether it was only to be used as he gave it for the special purpose of determining the prorogator, we don't know. We may suppose that it was Ptolemy's own invention in either case, for the ancients never attribute it to anyone else.

Porphyry gives his explanation in Chapter 43 of his *Introduction to the Tetrabiblos*.

How to calculate by degree the division of the angles, the succedents, and the cadents.

"Ptolemy says in his chapter 'On the Time of Life' that the region around the ascending twelfth, from 5 of those degrees rising above the horizon down to the remaining 25 degrees rising beneath, must certainly be considered to be aphetic. He took those degrees rising before the ASC and the 25 degrees following as making up the 30 degrees of the twelfth. But this is done in these climes when the equinoctial sign rises, because, when the semicircle of the commanding signs is rising (that is, from Aries

to Virgo), it always makes the eastern quadrants greater than the whole 90 degrees, but the western quadrants less. Conversely, if one of the obeying signs rises, it makes the eastern quadrants less than, but the western quadrants more than 90 degrees. And it is plain that the degrees of the quadrant from the IMC to the ASC must be divided into three parts and a third part allotted to the ASC, and 5 degrees of its total taken as rising before, with the remainder following, and to do similarly with the rest of the quadrants. But if anyone says, when alluding to the number of degrees for any particular house, that a sixth must be put before, he does not understand it rightly; for if by chance there are between the MC and the ASC 72 degrees, the following quadrant will obviously have 108 degrees; then in the former case there will be a sixth of 24 degrees, and in the other a sixth of 36 degrees; and so the degrees before the MC will be 4, with 20 degrees following and in addition 48 degrees from the 11th and 12th houses, leaving only 4 degrees for the ASC, for there were 72 degrees altogether, and, taking away 68 degrees, only 4 degrees are left for the ASC. It is necessary for this method to have 6 degrees, for 6 is one sixth of 36; therefore, such a method is incorrect and not at all what is required .... From necessity, therefore, there remains the 5 degrees which rises before the ascending angle, but the remaining amount still owing follows the quantity of the division according to the quadrant." [I have omitted a garbled portion of the text at the ellipsis.]

The fourth system is attributed to the astrologer Pancharius (4th century ?), whose commentary on the *Tetrabiblos* is cited by Hephaestio of Thebes (b. 380) in his *Apotelesmatica*, Book 2, Chapter 11 'On the Length of Life according to the Truth and Ptolemy'. Pancharius's system is an ingenious double Porphyry that preserves the 30-degree extent of the ASC and the other angular houses, thus partially avoiding conflict with Ptolemy's definition of the aphetic place enclosing the ASC degree. Hephaestio speaks well of it, as we shall see, but it does not seem to have caught on. Hephaestio first calculates the house cusps (of his own chart) as Ptolemy had prescribed; that is, using the Equal House system but applying Ptolemy's 5/25 degree split to the cusps. Then he calculates them again using Pancharius's system. Here is the pertinent part of the chapter:

"...Let us say that someone has the ASC in the 25th degree of Aquarius; then the 1st house is taken from 5 degrees before the ASC, i.e. from 20 Aquarius to 20 Pisces; but in the reverse direction, from 20 Aquarius to 20 Capricorn, is the 12th or Bad Daemon (if we find any planet in these degrees, it cannot be considered as a prorogator), and likewise from 20 Capricorn to 20 Sagittarius is the 1Ith, and from 20 Sagittarius to 20 Scorpio is the 10th or MC; again, from 20 Scorpio to 20 Libra is the 9th, from 20 Libra to 20 Virgo is the 8th, inconjunct the ASC (and we do not admit it as an aphetic place), and from 20 Virgo to 25 Leo is the DSC, along with the 5 degrees down to 20 Leo that have already set."

"Most (astrologers) certainly define the aphetic places in this manner; but Pancharius, commenting on this topic, signified, as we said previously, that 30 degrees should not always be given to the three houses around the MC, but that we should do as follows. Since the ASC is 25 Aquarius and the MC around 5 Sagittarius, I count from 5 Sagittarius to 25 Aquarius, and the 80 degrees found falls short of 90 degrees by 10 degrees, which is 1/9 of 90. I put from the MC degree towards the east, instead of 15 degrees (half of a sign), 13 1/3 degrees, which is less than 15 degrees by a ninth part, and downwards to 18 1/3 degrees of Sagittarius. And similarly I put the 30 degrees of the Good Daemon except for 3 1/3 degrees, i.e. from 18 1/3 Sagittarius to 15 Capricorn. Similarly again, we count from the western horizon to the MC degree. I find 100 degrees, which is more than 90, again by a ninth part. Then from 5 Sagittarius backwards to 20 Scorpio, which is 15 degrees (half of a sign), becomes 16°40′, for I took a ninth part again of 15 to get 16°40′, and downwards to 18 1/3 Scorpio. And similarly the ninth (of 30 degrees) gives 3 1/3 degrees more, and (the 9th house extends) downwards from 18 1/3 Scorpio to 15 Libra."

  In this way then it is necessary, I believe, to reckon the five aphetic places with accuracy. . ."

  (The text, similar to the above, translated by Neugebauer & Van Hoesen (GH, L380, *Third* Version, pp. 131-2) is now known to be from the so-called Epitome IV of Hephaestio, rather than from the *Apotelesmatica* itself. However, it refers to the same horoscope and illustrates the calculation of Porphyry cusps with the 5/25 degree split.)

  To illustrate these various methods, here are the cusps of Hephaestio's horoscope calculated five different ways:

	E. H.	E. H. 5/25	Por.	Por. 5/25	Pan.
MC	258	208	59 00	308 00	188 20
XI	259	209	10 40	269 40	189 20
XII	250	200	280 20	230 20	150 00
ASC	25−	20−	25− 00	20−00	11− 40
II	25=	20 =	28 = 20	23 = 20	11 = 40
III	251	201	1 2 40	261 40	151 00

  The fifth and last of the ancient systems of house division was a logical development of the Porphyry system. Porphyry had trisected the zodiacal arcs of the quadrants. Sometime between the third and fifth century it occurred to someone to trisect the equatorial arcs corresponding to the zodiacal arcs. The astrologer Rhetorius, who compiled a massive and valuable *Compendium* of astrology around A.D. 500, gave a practical example of this method (GH, pp. 138-140). Like Porphyry, he elaborated his procedure to take the 5/25 degree split into account. In essence, the method is quite simple. For example, to find the cusps of the 11th and 12th houses, subtract the RA MC from the RA ASC, divide

the arc by 3, add a third to the RA MC to get the RA XI, another third to that to get the RA XII, and finally convert the RA's to zodiacal longitude. (I pass over the 5/25 degree complication.) The difference between intermediate cusps calculated in this manner and those calculated by trisection of the zodiacal arcs can amount to 3 degrees or so at most. Here again we can see a conscious striving toward what was perceived as an increase in mathematical precision. The originator of this system knew that equatorial arcs correspond exactly to intervals of time, while the related zodiacal arcs in most cases are slightly different. By trisecting the equatorial arcs, he removed a small time inequality. However, this system is essentially a variation of the Porphyry system. As such, they stand or fall together.

   When Greek astrology passed to the Arabs in the eighth century, this system was transmitted along with the Equal House system and the Porphyry system. Some five centuries after Rhetorius, the popular Arab astrologer Alchabitius (Al-Qabisi, d.c. 967) explained it, so that today it is commonly called the Alchabitius System. According to Nallino (*Opus Astronomicum*, t. 1, pp. 246-49), explanations of this system appear in a number of medieval astronomical works, including those of Habash ibn Abd Allah (9th century) and Al-Battani (d. 929/30). However, it failed to achieve any lasting popularity in the West, and, so far as I am aware, it is not used today.

Conclusion

 The five systems of house division set forth above are the systems of classical antiquity. Interestingly, the two oldest systems, Sign-House and Equal House, have been in constant use since their invention, thus presumably giving satisfaction to their users. By contrast, the earliest quadrant systems have fallen from favor. It would in fact seem that there is some essential difficulty with quadrant systems, since no less than five – Campanus, Regiomontanus, Placidus, Koch, and Topocentric – have gained some success since the 13th century.

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Note. The preceding pages contain a transcript of the text of the paper and its page numbers as it appeared in issue 1 of the *Journal of Research*, published in 1982.

Notes added by the author in 2003.

1. On p. 20 I stated that Ptolemy's books became available in the 2nd century A.D. I have since concluded that they did not become available until the beginning of the 4th century.

2. On p. 23, I misquoted Firmicus. According to the published Teubner text, he did not mention the degree of the midheaven as sometimes falling in the 9th house, but rather in the 11th house. This was perhaps because the 11th house is the house of the Good Daemon, and it would be thought favorable for the MC degree to fall there.

However, it is possible that the Latin text should be emended to read IX instead of XI at p. 58,25 of the Teubner text. For, nearly half the time the MC degree will fall in the 9th house, and nearly half in the 10th house; but in the latitudes of southern Europe and farther south, only rarely would it ever fall in the 11th house (or in the 8th house).

3. I can also mention that I have since translated Paul of Alexandria and Rhetorius, and the translations may be printed in 2005 or 2006.

Notes added by the author in 2007.

1. The Alchabitius System has been revived by some students of Medieval Astrology.

2. My translations of Paul of Alexandria and Rhetorius are now scheduled to be printed in 2008.

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