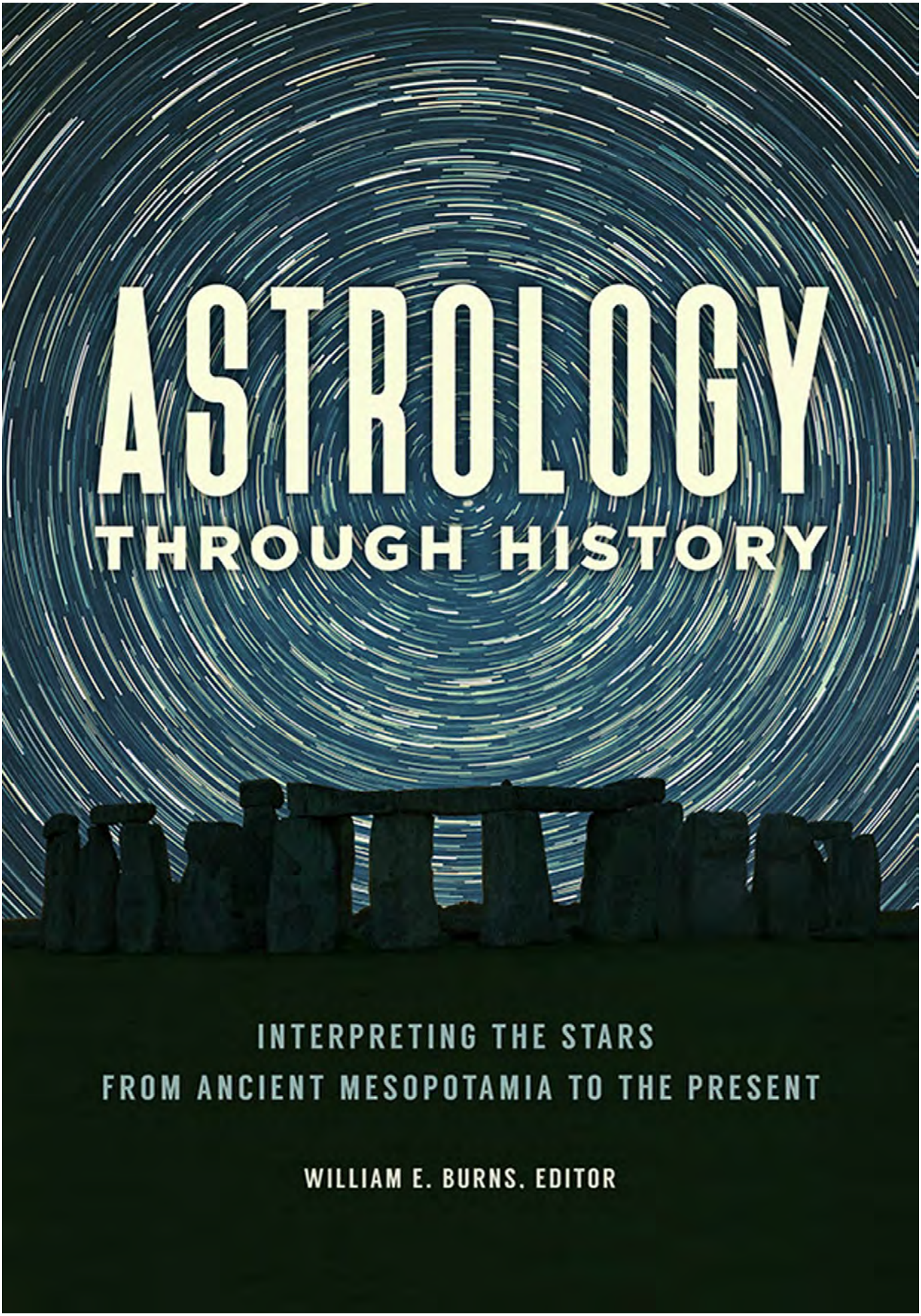
ASTROLOGY
THROUGH HISTORY
INTERPRETING THE STARS
FROM ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA TO THE PRESENT
WILLIAM E. BURNS, EDITOR

Astrology through History

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Dedicated to the Memories of Lucretia Sargent
and Chris Sargent

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Long-Term Astronomical and Calendar Counts

A third tradition depends on long-term astronomical changes and calendrical counts. The Indian system of yugas, adapted by the Persians, divides history into periods of thousands or millions of years, separated by apocalyptic upheavals. In the 19th century, the scheme was adopted by Western Theosophists who believed that a coming global crisis was presaged by entry into the kali yuga, the worst of all possible worlds. However, the end of the kali yuga would inaugurate the return to spirituality. Theosophists were also instrumental in developing the belief that the movement (precession) of zodiac signs in relation to the position of the sun at the annual spring equinox (see Age of Aquarius) leads to a spiritual New Age. From the 1970s this prophecy was adapted to the so-called long count of the Maya calendar, from which it was deduced that October 2012 would signify the decisive shift into the New Age. The idea became popular in the Americas where the Maya calendar was seen as an authentic New World basis for prophecy, in contrast to the Aquarian Age, which relied on the Greco-Babylonian zodiac of the Old World. Such technical differences aside, the 2012 prophecies exactly repeated those of Aquarian Age theorists. The so-called 2012 phenomenon attracted intense media interest in the run-up to the key date. However, although the majority of protagonists argued that the date signified an inner transformation that might not be evident in external events, most media attention emphasized the danger of apocalyptic disaster, misrepresenting its character.

Nicholas Campion

See also: Age of Aquarius; Astrotheology; Bible; Christianity; Comets; Indian Astrology; Mesoamerican Astrology; Mundane Astrology; New Age; Pont, Robert

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ART

Art can be defined as the creation of monuments and artifacts that convey cultural values that engage the senses beyond words. When linked with astrology, defined as "the practice of relating the heavenly bodies to lives and events on earth, and the traditions that have thus been generated" (Curry 1999, 55), art helps us understand how other cultures saw these heavenly bodies and the value they placed upon them. Ancient globes, classical synagogue mosaics, ninth-century Islamic desert bath houses, stained glass windows and sculptural archivolts in medieval cathedrals, frescoes on the walls of medieval private chapels, castles, and palaces, early modern paintings containing mythology, the ceilings of Popes and bankers,

and the works of contemporary artists such as Joan Miró (1893–1983), Alexander Calder (1898–1976), and Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), all show the diverse ways cultures have responded to these heavenly bodies.

In Mesopotamia, kudurrus or boundary stones dating as far back as 1350 BCE contained images of the sun, moon, and Venus and some constellations. Kudurrus were stone documents stored in a temple that recorded the land granted by the king to his vassals. The kudurrus were stored in a temple but the vassal would be given a clay copy to be used as a boundary stone as confirmation of legal ownership. The planets engraved on the boundary stones served as witnesses to protect and oversee the contract (Thierens 1935, 25; Bahn 2000, 78).

Images of the constellations in the form of globes in late Hellenistic and Roman pedagogy (Ryan 2012, 122) were based on the work of Aratus of Soli (ca. 315/310–240 BCE) whose poem *Phaenomena* was written for a sky-watching readership. Aratus encouraged the reader to understand the constellations visible from the Northern Hemisphere, as well as how to predict the weather through descriptions that included similes and mythic personifications (Aratus 2010, xvi). As D. Mark Possanza has observed, because it offered "a non-technical exposition of the constellations and celestial sphere in relatively short compass, it was adopted as a kind of guidebook to the heavens and became part of the reading list in the Greco-Roman system of education" (Possanza 2012, 67). Aratus went to great lengths to describe how the zodiac constellations could be seen along the ecliptic in relation to the constellations surrounding them and how they could best be observed as they ascended in the east. Visible depictions within the broader field of the starry dome with constellational relationships made his explanations clearer. On all of the globes the constellations are depicted from the outside looking down toward the Earth. Although only three celestial globes have survived from the classical world—Kugel's Globe, dated to ca. 300–100 BCE, and so named as it was acquired and is still exhibited by the Gallery J. Kugel Antiquaries in Paris; the Farnese Atlas, dated to 117–138 CE; and the Mainz Globe, dated to ca. 150–220 CE and acquired in 1996 by the Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseum in Mainz, Germany—fragments from three others have been found (the Salzburg fragment, the Berlin fragment, and the Larissa globe) (Dekker 2012, 52–56). Although there were differences in the style and quality of the images based on how much knowledge the goldsmith or sculptor brought to bear, in all three globes the zodiac constellation images are clearly recognizable and consistently represented.

Elaborate mosaic panels on the pavements of six synagogues in Israel dating from the fourth to the sixth centuries CE—Hammat Tiberias, south of Tiberias on the west bank of the Sea of Galilee; Sepphoris, or Zippori, in the central Galilee, six kilometers north–northwest of Nazareth; Beit Alpha at the foot of the northern slopes of the Gilboa mountains near Beit She'an; Huseifa, on Mount Carmel, south of Haifa; Na'aran, on the West Bank north of Jericho, in Ephraim; and Horvat Susiya, in the Judean hills south of Hebron—depict the zodiac surrounding the central chariot of the sun (a Greek motif). The corners depict personifications of the four "turning points" ("tequfot") of the year, solstices and equinoxes, each named for the month in which it occurs—tequfah of Tishrei, tequfah of Tevet,

tequfah of Ni(san), tequfah of Tamuz. The identical designs found in each synagogue offer an insight into Jewish thought and culture after the second Temple had been destroyed (Hachlili 1996, 61; Laderman 2013, 71). Some scholars have suggested the synagogue mosaics affirmed a Jewish belief in an ordered world; others have seen them as calendrical, linking them with the decision by Hillel II (360 CE), the leader of Palestinian Jewry, to reveal the knowledge of the intercalation of the lunar and solar year of the Jewish calendar. These mosaic pavements suggest this was a community that maintained a relationship with the sky visibly emphasized by the images of the zodiac on which they walked.

Representation of the sky is also found in early Islamic architecture in the sand-colored limestone complex of Quṣayr ʻAmra, a bath-house located in the desert east of the northern tip of the Dead Sea. Quṣayr ʻAmra is one of several hunting lodges and fortresses established in the deserts of Syria and Jordan during the first half of the eighth century and used as desert retreats to escape the pestilence and politics of large cities. The complex is covered in brightly colored frescoes and mosaics. It is, however, the 2.75 meter diameter dome/cupola of the *caldarium* portraying in fresco the night sky with 35 constellations of the Northern Hemisphere and zodiac signs that Emilie Savage-Smith described as the earliest evidence within Islamic culture of painted celestial cartography (Savage-Smith 1992, 12).

In the late 11th century, Muslim Spain and the kingdom of Sicily changed to Christian rule and attracted European translators in search of new learning. These translations changed European astrology. Astrological learning was incorporated into imagery found in ecclesiastical and civic architecture, manuscript illumination, and Books of Hours. In Padua, the Commune, or city government, commissioned Giotto di Bondone (ca. 1267–1337) to implement a monumental fresco scheme for the restoration of the Commune's law courts, the Palazzo della Ragione, in the early 14th century. The fresco scheme of 319 images across three registers on these newly heightened bare walls is filled with astronomical and astrological imagery, informed by the extensive astrological knowledge of Pietro d'Abano (ca. 1250–ca. 1316), who was teaching medicine, philosophy, and astrology at Padua University at the time. Along the walls of the top register of the first floor Salone, restored following the original scheme after fire damage in 1420, are images of heavenly constellations. Images of the zodiac signs are clearly identifiable in the middle register of the scheme. The complete three-register fresco scheme also contains images that represent the Labors of the Month, together with Christian saints, trades and skills exemplified by the Paduan workforce, and theological and liturgical images. The scheme visually reminded the judges who worked in this building of the cosmology in which they lived, an Aristotelian sympathetic cosmos creating the accord that the Commune regarded as important between the order of the celestial realms and the order of life on Earth (Gunzburg 2016, 87–113).

From 1430–1650, Popes, wealthy bankers, and merchants in Italy filled the vaults of their chapels and reception halls with stars, planets, and constellations. Their aim was also to be in accord with the heavens. Via painted imagery, astrology was translated into the visual mythology of antiquity, which underpinned the regeneration and implementation of classical learning. An example is the

horoscopic ceiling found in the Sala di Galatea in the Villa Farnesina in Rome, commissioned in ca. 1511 by Agostino Chigi, a Sienese banker and treasurer to Pope Julius II, which depicts the zodiac images portrayed alongside the personifications of the planets but laid out as Chigi's horoscope. A second example, the Sala dei Pontifici (Borgia Apartments) in the Vatican Palace, decorated in 1520–1521 for Pope Leo X (1475–1521, Pope 1513–1521), also depicts the zodiac images portrayed alongside the personification of the planets but this time laid out as the Chaldean order of the planets and their rulerships. A third example, the Sala Bologna, Vatican Palace commissioned by Pope Gregory XIII (1502–1585, Pope 1572–1585) in 1575, shifted away from the personal and employed mapmaking in an effort to understand heavenly space. Emily Urban has argued that Pope Gregory XIII may have been influenced by his close friend Gabriele Paleotti (1522–1597), then Bishop of Bologna, who believed that "a learned viewer who looked at such a painting would not merely see a map or landscape, but would be able to metaphysically contemplate each aspect of the image and comprehend God's presence in everything depicted" (Urban 2016, 157; Paleotti [1582] 1961, 384–385).

Illuminated manuscripts depicted astrology within the calendrical parts of books, each month occupying two pages and accompanied by miniatures of the signs of the zodiac and Labors of the Month. Examples are the Queen Mary Psalter (1310–1320) (Royal MS 2 B VII) or in the *Très Riches Heures* of John, Duke of Berry

A 16th-century German book of hours shows the association of the period when the sun is in the zodiacal sign of Leo with the time of reaping. (J. Paul Getty Museum)

(1340–1416), created between ca. 1412 and 1416 by the Limbourg brothers and Jean Colombe. In the 17th century, astrological engravings appeared in books written by physicians such as English Paracelsian physician Robert Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi Historia*, published in Oppenheim, 1617, which depicts a seated man with a square horoscope on the table front of him conversing with a client in *An Astrologer Casting a Horoscope*. They also appear in Dutch poet and engraver Jan Luyken's (1649–1712) *Het Menselyk Bedryf* (*Book of Trades*) (1694) where an etching of *The Astrologer* depicts a man seated by a table containing a globe of the world and an armillary sphere.

Astrology was reflected in early modern and 19th-century painted works that moved away from walls and ceilings, such as Sandro Botticelli's (ca. 1445–1510) *Venus and Mars* (tempera and oil on poplar), thought to be a backboard from a chest or daybed, Johannes Vermeer's (1632–1675) *The Astronomer* (oil on canvas), Jan Brueghel the Younger's (1601–1678) *Children of the Planet Sun* (oil on canvas), Elihu Vedder's (1836–1923) *The Pleiades* (oil on canvas), and Witold Pruszkowski's (1846–1896) *Falling Star* (oil on canvas), among others, showing the continuing meaning and cultural importance of the sky.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the artistic emphasis was also focused on how to use the heavens as instruments. Thus apertures created in buildings so that they focused light at particular moments of the day for timing or remembrance resulted in meridian lines. An example is in the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels and the Martyrs in Rome, completed by Francesco Bianchini (1662–1729) in 1702, built along the meridian that crosses Rome at longitude 12° 30' E, which focused light onto the line at solar noon. Its threefold purpose was to check the accuracy of the Gregorian reformation of the calendar, to have at hand a ready tool to predict Easter exactly, and to compete with the meridian line in Bologna cathedral. It was, however, in itself a beautifully created artefact made of bronze surrounded by white and yellow marble. Bianchini also placed holes in the ceiling to mark the passage of stars.

In the 21st century, architect Daniel Libeskind incorporated sunlight, date, time, and place to create his *Wedge of Light* at the National September 11 Memorial in New York. Each year between 8:46 a.m. and 10:28 a.m. on September 11, the sun casts a shaft of light across the plaza in remembrance of the nearly 3,000 people killed in the terror attacks of 2001 at the World Trade Center.

In the 20th century, the close working relationship between American sculptor Alexander Calder (1898–1976) and Spanish painter Joan Miró (1893–1983) resulted in a number of astrological works: Miró's *Constellations*, a series of 23 small paintings on paper painted between 1939 and 1941 and Calder's *Constellations* (1943), 29 tabletop wood and wire constructions. In 1940, after escaping from France to the Spanish island of Mallorca, Miró wrote, "I felt a deep desire to flee. I shut myself deliberately. The night, music and the stars began to play a role in my painting." Between 1955 and 1958 Miró also created the pair of ceramic murals for the UNESCO building in Paris, entitled *Wall of the Sun* and *Wall of the Moon*. In 1967, Salvador Dalí (1904–1989) created a limited edition series of lithographs known as *The Twelve Signs of the Zodiac* suite.

Gustav Holst, *The Planets*

The best-known musical composition animated by astrology and theosophy is the suite of German composer Gustav Holst (1874–1934), the seven linked compositions known as *The Planets* first performed in 1918. (The music was composed earlier, but performance was delayed by World War I.) The seven planets are the astronomical planets known at the time from Mercury to Neptune (excluding Earth) not the seven planets of traditional astrology, which include the sun and moon. Holst was inspired by an interest in theosophy and a friendship with English astrologer and writer Clifford Bax (1886–1962). Immediate inspiration for *The Planets* came from a book by astrologer and theosophist Alan Leo, *The Art of Synthesis* (1912). *The Art of Synthesis* is divided into chapters on each planet, in the same manner as Holst's composition. Many of the elements associated with planets, such as that of Mars with war, are embodied in Holst's music.

Darrelyn Gunzburg

See also: Hellenistic Astrology; Islamic Astrology; Judaism; Medieval European Astrology; Mesopotamian Astrology; Renaissance and Reformation Astrology; Roman Astrology; Zodiacs

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ASHENDEN, JOHN

John Ashenden (variously Ashindon, Eschenden, Eschuid, and Eastwood) was a 14th-century English astrologer and the compiler of an important sourcebook of astrological theory. A fellow of Merton College, Oxford, ca. 1337–1355, Ashenden was a member of the "Merton School" of natural philosophy, an influential circle of scholars who wrote on astrology, astronomy, mathematics, and physics.

Ashenden authored a series of tracts making astrological predictions based on eclipses and planetary conjunctions. The earliest of his prognostications involved a lunar eclipse and a conjunction of Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn in March 1345. From these events he forecast chaos, conflict, and "great mortality." A bloody outbreak in the Hundred Years' War, marked particularly by the battles of Crecy and Neville's Cross and the arrival of the Black Death, seemed to confirm Ashenden's predictions. In another composition dating to 1349 he wrote that mortality from the plague would lessen as "dry" celestial forces would soon counteract the "cold-wet" nature of the disease. Two later treatises discussed eclipses and planetary conjunctions occurring in 1357 and 1365, respectively. Ashenden interpreted the 1365 alignment of Jupiter and Saturn as being particularly consequential. He believed celestial influences would favor an English victory over the French, lead to the overthrow of Islam in the Holy Land, cause troubles for the Papacy, and give rise to a new religious sect. He commented on the prospects for religious upheaval but distanced himself from millenarian speculators who attempted to validate their claims through astrology. Ashenden's astrological writings were highly academic in character; there is no evidence that he made predictions in order to attract aristocratic patronage or to win ecclesiastical preferment.

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