Definition: *astrology* from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Study of the influence supposedly exerted by stars and planets on the natures and lives of human beings. Western astrology draws specifically on the movements of the Sun, Moon and major planets of the Solar System in relation to the stars that make up the 12 constellations known as the zodiac. Astrology originated in ancient Babylon and Persia c.4000 years ago, and rapidly spread through Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. In Europe, the growing influence of Christianity saw the demise of astrologers. Popular horoscopes still appear in some daily newspapers.

Summary Article: *astrology*  
From *Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*

Astrology deals with the observation of celestial phenomena for the purpose of explaining past, present, and future events on Earth. It is based on the assumption that the movement of the celestial bodies has an influence on the sublunar world and that this influence can be observed and used for prognostication. Such prognostications might be used for private purposes. In the context of politics in Islam, they have helped in decision making and have been an important tool for propaganda.

The science of astronomy and astrology was highly developed in the medieval Islamic world. Astronomers, including Jews, Christians, and Muslims, drew extensively on the scientific traditions of both the Greeks and the Indians but made significant advances to the practice, including correcting the Ptolemaic model of the planet’s orbits or proposing heliocentric models of the solar system. Major observatories were built in Baghdad, Maragha, Samarqand, Istanbul, and Jaipur, and extensive programs of astronomical observations were carried out and recorded in tabulations. The use of astronomy to determine the correct direction of prayer (*qibla*) and precise prayer times for different geographical regions caused it to gain acceptance with religious scholars, too.

Astronomy proper usually was not sharply distinguished from astrology. One of the main employment opportunities for the scientists who investigated the heavens was as astrological advisors to rulers, charged with predicting the outcomes of important decisions and determining propitious times for important undertakings. Astrological predictions were generally disapproved by Sunni scholars, while the Shi‘i position toward astrology was more favorable.

Astrology is divided into two main branches: individual astrology and mundane astrology. Individual astrology deals with the fate of a single person, while mundane astrology focuses on the fate of the entire world, or at least the fate of a region or town. Changes of rulers and dynasties also fit under the rubric of mundane astrology. Individual astrology includes nativities, interrogations, and elections. Nativities are horoscopes cast at the moment of birth that are used to predict general aspects of a newborn’s life. These predictions might be refined every year by birthday horoscopes. Astrologers also answer specific questions of their clients (interrogations/maṣā‘īl) regarding, for example, the fate of a missing husband or the whereabouts of a runaway slave. *Katarchai* (elections/ikhtiyārāt) serve to determine the best timing for undertaking or beginning such actions as marriage or travel. All three types of horoscopes were used not only by ordinary men but also by officials and rulers. Thousands of birth horoscopes for princes have been cast in the history of the Islamic world. Some of these horoscopes were collected in a kind of family album, while others constitute entire books, sometimes
lavishly produced, with up to more than 350 pages. The birth horoscope of Iskandar Sultan, a Timurid ruler of Shiraz, even contains a circular miniature showing the zodiac and the planets at the moment of his birth. Such extensive birth horoscopes usually predict the future importance and glory of the prince. They were presumably produced long after the fact, following the accession of the prince in question. This was certainly the case not only with the birth horoscope of Iskandar Sultan but also with the four different birth horoscopes of the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great (r. 1556–1605) given in the Akbarnama. Predicting his religious and political reforms, they were completed only after the implementation of his reform program and therefore clearly served propagandistic aims.

Katarchai were often used in the context of political decision making. They helped to decide when to hold a coronation, when to set out for a campaign, when to enter a town, when to break ground for a construction project, and especially when to begin a battle. The events so determined varied in importance. Cairo owes its name (al-Qāhirah in Arabic, meaning "the Conquering One") to the ascendant position of Mars, qāhir al-aflāk (Subduer of the Heavens), at the moment the city walls were raised at the order of Caliph Mu‘izz (953–75) shortly after the Fatimid conquest of Egypt in 969. In contrast, many rulers did not even go on a hunt without consulting their astrologers. Some of a ruler’s responsibility was thus delegated to the astrologer, who was to blame in case of failure. Under such dynasties as the Ottomans and the Safavids, the court astrologers, and particularly the chief astrologer (munajjim-bashi), were consulted constantly for propitious dates to begin campaigns, conclude treaties, make diplomatic overtures, and even receive guests. The standard procedure was for the chief astrologer, or a group of several court astrologers, to propose a couple of dates from which the sovereign would choose the most fitting. Some rulers shared the misgivings of the pious or religious scholars with regard to astrology. The Ottoman sultan Abdülhamid I (1774–89) refused to delay setting out on a military campaign when his astrologer cautioned him to wait for a more propitious time, remarking that his affairs were in the hands of God, not the stars. He was in the decided minority among the other members of the dynasty, as the chief astrologer was a trusted and influential advisor for many of them. His namesake, Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1870–1909), was so dependent on the advice of his chief astrologer, Ebu al-Huda, that he would not meet an ambassador or make any administrative decision without consulting him. Ebu al-Huda reportedly increased his influence with the assistance of an accomplice in the telegraph office who would reveal to him the messages from the provinces before delivering them to the sultan. Ebu al-Huda would immediately present predictions about affairs in the provinces to Abdülhamid II, and the telegrams would inevitably prove his “predictions” correct, reinforcing the sultan’s belief in his abilities. The astrologer fell out of favor only when he failed to predict the revolution of the Young Turks in 1908 and, condemned for high treason, was incarcerated on an island in the Sea of Marmara.

In the field of mundane astrology, the annual return of the sun to the vernal equinox at the New Year underlies all calculations. The years are not equally important, however, but are grouped into so-called World Years. These World Years are fixed periods of time that divide history into cyclically returning segments of similar length. The beginning of each new World Year indicates an important event such as the ascension of a new dynasty, and the horoscope of the corresponding vernal equinox is of foremost importance for prognostication. The most common of these World Years depends on the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, which happens about every 20 years. Great conjunctions, which are time cycles of approximately 240 years, result from grouping together 12 to 13 of these conjunctions depending on their location in the zodiac. Great conjunctions are the unit most frequently used in mundane astrology, although cycles (dawr, adwār) of 360 years and other time intervals were also taken into
consideration. The political relevance of these cycles results from their association with specific regions, religions, and ethnic groups. According to this doctrine, the people, the religion, and the region of the actual cycle dominate politics and society during their interval of time. The fate of rulers and dynasties and especially their impending end was therefore predicted with the help of this theory, but as periods of 240 years are too long to be very useful for political propaganda, cycles of 360 years and 240 years and subdivisions of both were intermixed. By this combination, the number of potentially significant vernal equinoxes was considerably increased.

Mundane astrology, which was widespread in the Late Sasanid Empire, probably gained popularity in the Islamic world with the rise of Iranian influence after the Abbasid revolution. Astrological arguments were frequently used in the context of anti-Abbasid or anti-Arab propaganda and eschatological expectations. The need to confront such propaganda on equal footing might initially have been the strongest incentive on the Arab side for tackling the foundations of astrology. The discipline was more or less unknown in pre-Islamic Arabia, where the stars were observed mainly for information on the seasons and guidance in the desert. After the Arab conquest, pro-Iranian restoration movements referred to astrological arguments for claiming that the end of Arab dominance was near. In the Kitab al-Dawr al-'Utaridi (The book of the cycle of Mercury), a cyclic world history based on the theory of conjunctions and adwār, predictions of the final collapse of the Abbasid dynasty in the year 1001 went together with expectations of the end of Arab rule and a return of Iranian supremacy. Such ideas were especially popular with the Isma'ili, and they proved long-lived: in the 16th century, we still find speculations about the beginning of eschatological times, which were based on the approach of a Great Conjunction. The Safavid ruler Shah 'Abbas I took these predictions of an impending change so seriously that he resigned for three days at the ominous date and had himself replaced by a Nuqtawi shaykh, who was killed afterward. The title sāhib-qirān (Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction), attributed to Tamerlane (r. 1370–1405) and later to Shah Jahan (r. 1627–58), as well as the tendency to correlate the birth date of important rulers with specific Saturn-Jupiter conjunctions also testify to the enduring importance of conjunctional astrology.

Political astrology lost its outright importance in the Islamic world only at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Its persistence in private context is unknown.

See also knowledge

Further Reading


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