

Asteroids and Mythic Astrology (June 2010)

By Demetra George

For the first four thousand years of astrological practice, astrologers and astronomers knew of only seven visible moving bodies—the Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Since 1781, not only have Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto attained the status of planets, but many thousands of additional celestial bodies have joined the ranks of the inhabitants in our solar system.

The belt between Mars and Jupiter contains more than 400,000 asteroids. Some astrologers have incorporated Ceres, Pallas, Juno, and Vesta into their chart analysis, but are daunted at the prospect of considering the 15,000 other asteroids for which there now exist ephemerides. Chiron was discovered in 1977, traveling between the orbits of Saturn and Uranus, and it quickly became popular among astrologers. Then by the 1990's, a number of other centaurs—Pholus, Nessus, Asbolos, Hylonome, and Chariko—were identified in Chiron's region of space. The dust of the Kuiper Belt extends 7 billion miles beyond Neptune. In the first decade of the 21st century, a host of other celestial icy objects—Orcus, Haumea, Makemake, Quaoar, Varuna, Ixion, Eris, and Sedna—have been found in the Oort Cloud, which is billions of miles further away.

The multitude of newly discovered celestial bodies challenges the astrological community to ascribe meaning to them in our rapidly expanding solar system, or not to. This paper documents the history of asteroid research, and argues that the mythic tradition, present from the very beginning of the astrological way of thinking, is a valid philosophical approach by which to delineate the interpretive significance of celestial bodies in chart analysis.

History of Asteroid Discovery and Research

Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) speculated in *Mysterium Cosmographicum*, “Between Mars and Jupiter, I place a planet.” Fifty years later, J. D. Titius (1729–1796) presented a detailed study of the relationship between the distances of planets from the Sun, and noted a significant gap between Mars and Jupiter. This theory later became better known as Bode's Law. It was initially dismissed as a piece of idle curiosity, but Uranus' discovery in 1781, at the predicted Bode AU position, precipitated astronomical societies worldwide to search for the missing planet.

On January 1, 1801, a Sicilian priest, Giuseppe Piazzi (1746–1826) was correcting errors in a star catalogue, and accidentally discovered a new body, which he named *Ceres Ferdinandea*, after both the Roman and Sicilian goddesses of grain, whose mythological site was near his observatory, and King Ferdinand IV of Naples and Sicily. The asteroid Ceres was subsequently lost from sight, but found again in December of that year, at its predicted Bode position. In the next few years, several more asteroids—Pallas (1802), Juno, (1804), and Vesta (1807)—were discovered. It is important that these asteroids were located in accordance with Bode's Law, which indicates that they are part of the underlying mathematical and geometrical structure of the solar system, and not aberrant cosmic gravel, as some astrologers suggest.

Piazzi set the precedent by naming asteroids after goddesses, as the astronomer who discovered the asteroid had the privilege of proposing its name. Each asteroid was given a number in chronological order and, for the most part, a name from classical myth. About 95% of the asteroids have regular orbits, and these were given feminine names; the remaining 5% with irregular orbits were given masculine names. By the end of the 19th century, there were 450 asteroids, mostly named after Greco-Roman goddesses or women. In the 20th century, asteroids were named after both gods and goddesses from many world mythic traditions, and after countries, cities, rivers, male and female common names in honor of relatives, colleagues, distinguished musicians, painters, writers, intellectuals, and concepts.

In the century following their discovery asteroids received only passing mention by a few astrologers—Wilson, Leo, and Sepharial. No ephemerides were available, so interest was theoretical and sparse. It was not until 1973 that the first asteroid ephemeris for Ceres, Pallas, Juno, and Vesta was published, due to the untiring efforts of New York

astrologer Eleanor Bach,¹ who convinced an astronomer to calculate their difficult orbits in an age before computers. Bach proposed tentative meanings for the asteroids, derived from the mythology associated with their names. In the next several years, Esther Leinbach² and Emma Bell Donath³ investigated the asteroids and put forth their preliminary findings. Meanwhile, Neil Michelsen produced more accurate ephemerides and Zip Dobyns began research into these new bodies.⁴ When Chiron was discovered in 1977, Al Morrison immediately put out its ephemeris.⁵

Morrison, with the assistance of Lee Lehman, ushered in the 1980s with the publication of a dozen more ephemerides of the ‘minor’ asteroids.⁶ On the East Coast, Lehman, Diana Rosenberg, and Nona Gwynn Press⁷ made strides in asteroid research, while on the West Coast, Michelson, Dobyns, Batya Stark, and Mark Pottenger⁸ pursued further investigations. Tony Joseph,⁹ Frances McEvoy, Lorraine Welsh, and Pamela Crane lectured, taught, wrote articles, and sponsored asteroid-related education during this time. And, the first books about Chiron by Erminie Lantero, Richard Nolle, and Zane Stein came out.¹⁰

The second part of the 1980’s saw the publication of works about the asteroids by Demetra George,¹¹ Press,¹² Lehman,¹³ and Martha Lang Wescott;¹⁴ Pottenger made his CCRS asteroid program, which generated positions for thousands of asteroids, available to the public. The NCGR Asteroid SIG¹⁵ was formed, and it is still active. Roxana Muise instituted a service to provide individual asteroid ephemerides and complete lists of thousands of asteroids for an individual chart. Additional insights on Chiron were published by Barbara Hand Clow and Melanie Reinhart.¹⁶

In the 1990’s, astronomer Lutz D. Schmadel published the *Dictionary of Minor Planet Names*¹⁷ (with current online updates), which served as an inspiration for Jacob Schwartz’s¹⁸ encyclopedia and software programs. Press and George published other books that included research on the minor asteroids,¹⁹ and Ariel Guttman and Kenneth Johnson gave equal space to the asteroid archetypes in their *Mythic Astrology* books.²⁰ Adam Gainsberg, Eric Francis, and Martin Lass continued their research into Chiron.²¹ In the first decade of the 21st century, we have seen additional asteroid research as Roderick Kidston,²² Melanie Reinhart,²³ Phillip Sedgwick, Dave Campbell,²⁴ Jonathan Dunn, Brian Clark²⁵, Kelley Hunter,²⁶ Mark Holmes,²⁷ and Nick Anthony Fiorenza have investigated the centaurs and other objects in the distant realms of our solar system. Astrologers now have computer software to generate the zodiacal positions for over 15,000 asteroids.²⁸

The Mythic Tradition

The plethora of new objects orbiting in the solar system raises certain questions that our astrological forefathers did not have to consider. Do all celestial bodies have interpretive meaning in the astrological chart? If so, what methods can be used to research their individual significations in human and terrestrial experience? Are the mythological stories recounting the attributes and deeds of the deities a viable avenue by which to reveal this meaning? Do philosophic justifications and historical precedents exist for this approach? Let us begin by exploring the historical relationship between the planets and the gods after whom they are named. This query will inevitably lead us to uncover how politics and religion have influenced a mythic approach to astrology during various historical periods.

The earliest written evidence for astrology comes from Mesopotamia in the second millennium BCE. Known as the astral doctrine or astral religion, the planets were directly and implicitly understood to be one manifestation of the gods. By their appearances in sky, the planetary gods communicated their intentions to humans on the earth. A cuneiform text reads, “When Ishtar (the planet Venus as the goddess of love) stands on high (culminates in the sky), lovemaking (is) on the land.”²⁹

Divination by the stars was practiced in Mesopotamia for almost two thousand years before this astronomical knowledge arrived in Greece. In the 6th century BCE, the Pythagoreans gave the planets the names of the Greek gods who most closely resembled their Babylonian counterparts, but made it clear that a planet fell under the auspices of some god rather than being the god itself. Long before the development of astrology in Greece, Platonic philosophy alluded to a connection between planets, gods, and human character. At this time, Greek gods had long lived on Mt. Olympus, rather than in the sky. A century later, Plato proposed that the planets were visible manifestations of the

gods.³⁰ He wrote how the twelve Olympians drive their chariots along the course of their planetary orbits; each soul follows a particular deity, and when it returns to earth, it most closely resembles that planetary god.³¹

Astrology, as we know it today, emerged in Egypt in the 2nd century BCE under the rule of Greek kings. According to the Hellenistic authors, the earliest texts on astrology were ascribed to the legendary sage Hermes Trismegistus.³² Hermetic philosophy proposed a living cosmos imbued with a multitude of divine and semi-divine celestial spirits and a chain of correspondences whereby human body parts, plants, metals, stones, animals, scents, colors correspond to a particular planet, zodiacal sign, and divine spirit.

Several centuries later, Claudius Ptolemy (c. 90–c.170 AD) gave a physical explanation for the powers of the planets based upon Aristotle’s natural philosophy,³³ and after this time there was a split between the earlier spiritual hermetic astrology and the later more science-based astrology. A central question of subsequent philosophic debate that arose from this distinction was between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ astrology. Are planets appearances of gods expressing divine will, or are planets physical causes of material events? Are planets imbued with soul and consciousness, or are they composed of inert material devoid of sentience?

Henceforth, most mainstream Hellenistic astrological texts described the planets in terms of their physical qualities of hot, cold, wet, and dry, and gave significations for the planets, which while coincident with the characteristics of the gods, were not directly linked to the gods themselves. For example, while Mars had command over violence and military expeditions,³⁴ it was not *because* Mars was the God of War.” With only a few exceptions, mentions of the gods were rare.³⁵

This shift in astrological thinking, from a spiritual to a physical basis for its working, reflected larger cultural paradigm shifts from a mytho-poetic view of the cosmos to one based upon rational philosophy and natural causation. Political and religious considerations also played a role, especially when it was judicious that astrology not be perceived as promoting pagan planetary gods in the face of the deification of kings and emperors as gods. The increasing power of monotheism and a desire that astrology not be tainted by its association with magical thinking were additional factors in the distancing of gods from planets by most Hellenistic astrologers.

In late antiquity, the planet-god connection disappeared from mainstream astrology and went underground into the Hermetic, Gnostic, magical Jewish, and alchemical traditions.³⁶ This trend continued during the golden age of medieval Arabic astrology, when Aristotelian philosophy and Islamic monotheism prevailed in cosmological thinking. None of the major astrologers, such as Masha’allah, Sahl, Abu Ali Al-Khayyat, or Abu’Mashar, refer to planets as pagan mythic gods. However the planet-god connection survived and flourished in the Hermetic Sabian tradition of planetary god cults, temples, and rites practiced in Harran, whose traditions were brought to Baghdad by Thabit ibn Qurra (836–901) in the 9th century.³⁷ The spiritual foundations of astrology later emerged in Arabic Neoplatonist doctrines contained in the writings of the Brethren of the Purity, where astrology was seen as a means for a soul to return to God.³⁸

Following this precedent, Latin, Medieval, and Renaissance astrologers such as Bonatti, Cardanus, Morinus, Schoener, and Lilly did not mention mythic planet-god correspondences in their texts. However, the underground river of spiritual astrology flowed forth into Europe from two directions—the Harranian/Bagdad stream was transmitted to the Islamic Moorish kingdom in southern Spain, and reappeared in the Spanish *Picatrix*.³⁹ Byzantines fleeing the fall of Constantinople brought manuscripts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* to Italy, where they were translated by Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), and inspired his astrological treatise, *Three Books of Life*.⁴⁰ Henry Cornelius Agrippa wrote *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* in the 16th century as a compendium of the spiritual magical workings of the gods and planetary influences.⁴¹ The Renaissance book series *Children of the Planet* presented artistic images of planetary gods in the heavens as overseers of human occupations on earth, each accompanied by symbols of the zodiacal signs they rule. The power of images, symbols, and the imagination broke through centuries of suppression.

It was not until the 20th century, when Carl Jung re-conceptualized the gods as psychological forces of the psyche, that we see the full re-appearance of a mythic approach to the astrological interpretation of planets as archetypes. Jung wrote, “Astrology consists of symbolic configurations, just as does the collective unconscious, with which

psychology is concerned: the planets are the gods, symbols of the powers of the unconscious.”⁴² His articulation of this perspective liberated astrologers from the two thousand year taboo against imbuing planetary symbols with the magical powers of pagan gods.

A new generation of contemporary astrologers began to look to myth as a way of understanding the planetary archetypes. Wendy Ashley, Tony Joseph, Liz Greene, Eleanor Bach, Richard Idemon, Howard Sasportas, Brian Clark, Melanie Reinhart, Darby Costello, Kenneth Johnson, Ariel Guttman, Erin Sullivan, Kelly Hunter, and Demetra George all used mythology to deepen an astrological understanding of planetary influences in human behavior. The appearance of the asteroids on the astrological scene coincided with the articulation of a psychological-theoretical construct that utilized myth as a way of apprehending planetary meaning.

If it's in the Sky, it's in the Psyche

We will now revisit our question: Is there is a philosophical and historical justification for using myths to discern planetary meaning—specifically the meanings of the many asteroids and other recently discovered celestial objects? Plato put forth the idea that the planets are the visible appearances of the gods. The Hermetic philosophy declared that man is the image of the cosmos and “that which is above is like that which is below.”⁴³ The Stoics held the notion of cosmic sympathy, where everything is connected through a chain of correspondences between celestial bodies in the sky and life forms on earth. And Jung explained that gods correspond to aspects of human consciousness; images of gods are projections of active forces in the psyche. Images of deity are none other than the unified nature of mind itself, and it follows that planets (or any celestial bodies) stand as symbolic intermediaries in the chain of orders between deities and humans. In short, *if it's in the sky, it's in the psyche*; everything in the sky corresponds to some aspect of the psyche.

The astrological chart is a map of the arrangement of celestial bodies in the heavens that mirrors the structure of the psyche. Celestial bodies in the heavens correspond to centers of consciousness in the human psyche, whose natures can be accessed through the myths of the deity. The discovery of new celestial bodies corresponds to the awakening and activation of these centers of consciousness in the process of awakening mass consciousness. The plethora of newly discovered planetary bodies speaks of a quantum leap in human brain cell processing as witnessed by the information explosion of the Internet Age. The use of myth is one way to illuminate meaning in terms of the activation of human potential, synchronistic with discoveries in an expanding solar system.

How can these principles be applied to a technique for utilizing myth in the astrological interpretation of asteroids? How can we determine which of the multitude of celestial bodies are significant for an individual human being or event, based upon the inception moment? I suggest that we start by using small orbs to identify the asteroids that are connected with the power places of the chart; the Sun, Moon, the Ascendant and its ruler, as well as the other angles.

A brief example will illustrate this process: the event chart⁴⁴ for the fatal plane crash of John F. Kennedy, Jr. who, although a newly licensed pilot, ignored the advice of a seasoned professional concerning dangerous solar glare weather conditions. He took off in a small plane, which crashed into the ocean, drowning his wife and himself. At that moment, the asteroids Anubis, the Egyptian jackal-headed god, who escorted the dead to the Underworld, and Oceana, symbolizing the ocean depths, were rising on the Ascendant. Saturn, the Ascendant's ruler, was conjunct Icarus. The asteroid Icarus was named after the winged youth who likewise did not heed his father's warning not to fly too close to the Sun, because the heat would melt the wax holding together his feathered wings, and he subsequently crashed into the sea. Saturn and Icarus were exactly trine to the Moon, which was partile conjunct the asteroid Daedalus, the father of Icarus, whose flight and escape were successful. These mythic asteroids from Greek and Egyptian traditions in tight configuration with the primary planets and angles graphically portray the fateful events that ensued that evening, as the sun set into the horizon, depicted by the ancients as the place of death.

The Future

In recent centuries, astrologers had to accept the addition of Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto into their astrological symbol system, and arrived at interpretive meanings. The discovery of ever-increasing numbers of celestial bodies in the solar system in the last century spurred astronomers to reclassify objects in the solar system, and likewise forced astrologers to rethink their rationale concerning the incorporation and interpretation of such additional planetary bodies. The mythic approach, whose roots go back to the origin of astrology, has proved fruitful in the research involved in asteroid study in the last forty years, and provides us with a way for making meaning of the myriad gods in the heavens.

How do ancient myths continue to live on in contemporary psyches and society? Eris, the Greek goddess of strife, was vengeful at not being invited to the wedding feast of Thetis and Peleus, so she threw a golden apple into the crowd and incited the Trojan War. The discovery and naming of her asteroid in 2005 likewise upset the applecart, as she again caused dissension and controversy, and forced astronomers to reclassify objects the solar system by demoting Pluto, and promoting Ceres and Eris, to the status of dwarf planets.

Will the astrological community now reject Pluto and marginalize its importance in chart analysis because astronomers claim that it no longer has equal status with other planets? Or will they broaden their perspective to consider the value of other celestial bodies as integral parts of the wholeness of the cosmos and human nature? Asteroid research renews and revitalizes the mythic tradition, and points the way to understanding the profound connection between the gods, planets, and mind.

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- 33 Claudius Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, I.2.
- 34 Porphyry, *Introduction to the Tetrabiblos*, p. 45.
- 35 Manilius 2.433, 4.124ff, 5.36; Valens 1.1; Manetho; CCAG 8,3; 120-122 where certain gods are mentioned in connection with signs or planets are given an epithet of a god (hoary Saturn, fair Venus), but these allusions are never developed into any doctrine.
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