



# NEWSLETTER

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ARCHIVE

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Towards a new

## History of Astrology?

A Yuletide Wish

**A**STROLOGICAL histories are based on two presumptions. One is that astrology was derived from observation and deduction. The second is that it was transmitted by written means.

The first is easily demolished. Hellenistic astrology cannot be explained by means of observation, as Robert Schmidt's work with **Hindsight** brilliantly proves. Hellenistic astrology from the Classical period goes far beyond what can be developed by means of observation.

If astrology was derived from observation, ancient astrologers had better eyes & better brains than we do. In this regard, there seems to be an inverse relationship between brainpower & diet. Those of us who care about these things clearly eat better now than at any previous time in history, but I digress.

So how about the early books? Many of the best have survived. Which of these early ones, I wonder, were most prized? Answer: What do the following books have in common?

**Tetrabiblos**, by Ptolemy: Written, c. 140 AD, for Syrus, his patron. Unknown for at least a century.

**Carmen Astrologicum**, by Dorotheus of Sidon, first century AD. Unknown to Vettius Valens, a century later.

**Mathesoes Libri VIII**, by Julius Firmicus Maternus. Written, c. 340 AD, for his patron, Mavortius. It was largely unknown before the 12th century.

What do these books, and many others from the same period, have in common? **They were not written as manuals of instruction.** They were not written for students. They, like Bach's **Brandenburg Concertos**, were written for the idle amusement of a lord or noble. Or at least, that was the authors' fervent hope. They ended up, unread (and in Bach's case, unplayed), in libraries.

Where they were discovered decades, even centuries, later.

So if these early books, these masterpieces of the genre, were not used as teaching manuals, were not, in fact, eagerly snatched up by aspiring students, then how, and with what, were early astrologers taught?

Here's another set of "what do these have in common?"

**Carmen Astrologicum**, and, **Astronomica**, by Manilius

Answer: The word, *Carmen* means song. But a song on a printed page is what, exactly? A lyric. What are lyrics? Poetry. So what is **Astronomica**? Answer: A Latin didactic poem.

**S**O what do poems have that ordinary prose does not? Meter. What is meter? Meter is a form of rhythm based on syllabic order. What can meter & rhythm do that ordinary prose cannot?

Quickly, again: How many verses of **The Star Spangled Banner**, the US national anthem, do you know? Only the first? See all four **here**. How many stanzas of Poe's **The Raven**?

Now for the hard question: **WHY** do you know these verses? Why do you know them better than, say, Lincoln's **Gettysburg Address**? Many of us had to memorize and recite it in front of class. Why do you remember the song but not the Address?

What can meter and rhythm do that ordinary prose cannot? Meter can be memorized and recited, word for word, years, even decades later. How much can be memorized?

The **Iliad** is a Greek epic poem, dating

Jim Maynard's

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► **DO NOT WAIT!!** Maynard will be in good supply for about another three weeks. After mid-January, they can be hard to get.

## NEW BOOKS

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**Yesterday's Sky: Astrology & reincarnation** - Steven Forrest, 24.95

**Astrology & the Authentic Self** - Demetra George, 24.95

**Lunar Nodes: Discover your soul's karmic mission** - Celeste Teal, 27.95

 **The Dawn of Astrology: A cultural history of western astrology** - Nicholas Campion, 29.95

BACK IN PRINT:

**Houses of the Horoscope** - Bill Herbst, 24.95

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**McWhirter Theory of Stock Market Forecasting**, 39.95

NEW VEDIC BOOKS:

Sanjay Rath - **Brhat Naksatra**, 33.00

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to the 9th century BC. Written in dactylic hexameter, it comprises 15,693 lines of verse. It is known to have been transmitted orally for centuries. The only reason we know the age of the poem is because we know the approximate date of the events it records, the Trojan War: Around the 12th century BC.

So could astrology have been orally transmitted? Yes. It could have. For how long? We do not know, but the Indian Vedas give hints of staggering age.

Next question: Why oral transmission? Why not read a book?

**A**NSWER: Books were written by hand. Which meant there were not very many of them. It also meant they were expensive. Students, then and now, are poor. Consider also the format of early books: Individual leaves that were glued or stitched together to form long scrolls. Long term storage, or mere casual use, would risk leaves separating from other leaves. Which would result in a scroll in fragments. Once in pieces, it would not necessarily be clear which piece went where. Individual pieces were easily damaged, and just as easily lost altogether, which accounts for the lacunae in many of these scroll-based books. Early inks were subject to fading over time, and not just from exposure to sun and air. This is quite apart from accidental loss due to rain or fire, or deliberate destruction, as with the sack of the library at Alexandria. Remember, before the printing press, there were few copies of any book.

Now think of oral transmission. I presume the author started with words on paper, an outline at least, and gradually found the meter, the rhythm, the poetry, to express his ideas. Gradually his poem got longer & longer, more & more complete. Until finally he was finished and was happy, and began to recite it.

He did not recite his poem for idle amusement. Homer recited his to entertain a crowd & make a living. Astrologers recited theirs in order to answer questions & make a living. What did these memorized books amount to, in actual practice?

In actual practice, an astrologer would search the verses, in his mind, until he came to one that described the situation as he understood it. He would then speak it verbatim. This is where proverbs come from: Fragments of a forgotten whole.

I regret the following are not astrological. (If anyone knows where I can find pithy astrological proverbs, in English, I would

be grateful.)

*Absence makes the heart grow fonder.*

*A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.*

*A stitch in time saves nine.*

*One bad apple spoils the bunch.*

- Etc., etc. -

By such means, an astrologer could instruct his pupil. A father could teach his son. Word for word, preserved, intact, for centuries. Up to the fall of the Roman Empire, this was, in fact, how knowledge was transmitted, from generation to generation, century to century. This was why all notable Romans wrote in verse. They were hoping to achieve immortality by means of oral transmission.

I spent some time with the Introduction in G.P. Gould's translation of Manilius's **Astronomica**. In his Preface, Gould complains that Manilius is virtually untranslatable:

*Moreover, he frequently embarks on an audacious plan of rendering diagrams, tables, and maps in hexameter form; and in these places even the best of translations would need visual aids to be readily comprehensible.* (pg. vii)

You can almost hear his complaint: If only Manilius had written in Plain English, it would be so much easier to translate! But this gives the game away. **Astronomica** was intended to be memorized and recited. Tables in meter, however clumsy, could be recited and therefore remembered. Those in prose would be forgotten and lost. The author's challenge was to set his entire text not only in meter, but in the same meter, from first to last. The fate of Manilius's book was unlike that of Ptolemy's, or for that matter, Firmicus'.

At several places in his Introduction, Gould draws parallels between Manilius and Firmicus Maternus, at one point remarking that Firmicus had Manilius open in front of him as he wrote. Why did Firmicus favor Manilius, but not Ptolemy or Dorotheus?

**B**ECAUSE Manilius was, by 340 AD, in oral transmission. Firmicus did not "have a book open" in front of him. Firmicus was reciting Manilius from memory. Which also accounts for the variations in early written copies of **Astronomica**. Different people, when they came to set the book down in writing, had been reciting it differently.

So far as I can tell, oral transmission in the west ended, and was lost, starting with the fall of the Roman Empire. The outpost in Jerusalem fell in the Crusades, the one in Constanti-

nople in 1453. (In India, oral transmission continues to this day, as it does in China.)

Worse, the unfortunate consequence of early Islamic conquests, the unfortunate consequence of Charlemagne's persecution of pagans, of Genghis Khan's slaughter of entire cities, was the further eradication of oral transmission in the areas under the control of these ideologies.

**S**LAM became a religion of the Book, in this case, the **Koran**. From Koranic studies, Islam became a religion of scholars, which it is to this day. These scholars, lacking an oral tradition, invented a new kind of learning by means of the physical books they salvaged from here & there. These they carefully copied and preserved. They then added many new works of their own. These they transmitted to the monks of Europe & the early scholars of Spain & Italy, who also got assistance from the loot plundered by returning Crusaders. These became the basis of the first printed books centuries later.

By the time of **William Lilly** (17th century), all memory of oral transmission had been lost.

By these deductions, I establish the existence of an astrological oral transmission.

Academics will say that, well, oral books were not written down & are therefore lost & what is lost cannot be known and so cannot be studied, so what we have is the best we can do, so, please, dear Dave, get over yourself. But this is merely the excuse of weak minds. Textual analysis will prove that many early written books were transcriptions of oral books. Firmicus may well be Manilius embroidered - pieces of Manilius were actually found in Firmicus's text. More recently, my analysis of Richard Saunders' **Astrological Judgement & Practice of Physick** showed it to have been written at least 50 years prior to its first publication, which was 1677. Many early printed books were in fact centuries old hand-me-downs, but that's another story for another time.

So to return to an earlier question, how did early astrologers learn their craft?

Ancient astrologers were unanimous: They learned from **Hermes Trismegistus**, the mythical Egyptian sage. **Holden** states that Hermes was credited with 42 books, of which four concerned astronomy & astrology. All attempts to date, or even to establish the existence of Hermes, have failed. If we combine modern research with ancient opinion, we are left with the possibility that Hermes is of very great age indeed.

Next: How is oral knowledge different from written knowledge?

I have already noted that oral knowledge, in the form of proverbs, is often recited mindlessly. From this we may conclude that oral transmission discourages analysis while it promotes conformity and consensus. Oral knowledge becomes a form of ancestor worship.

So what if, trained in the oral transmission while a youth, we grow restless as the years pass and want to actually understand what we have endlessly recited? What about the times when there was no verse for the situation at hand? When we stood naked in front of the community and our verses made us look like fools? That sort of failure can sting. It can lead to loss of position, even loss of life.

So what do we do when the verses fail? How do we avoid being the fool?

**O**UR only hope is to look again at the verses, as those are all we know. Maybe there is some combination that will give us the answer we seek?

But here we run into problems with meter, with the very means that enabled us to memorize so easily and so precisely. If the solution is to run verse 214 into verse 65, the process will forever scramble the original verses, which will be lost. This is what commonly happens when we try to remember music in the back of our heads. We get stuck in repeats, where the music loops back on itself, rather than carry us to the final cadence.

The musical solution is to get out the score, i.e., refer to the printed page. The solution for the itinerant savant is to write out what he thinks he knows. Write out the verses. *Et voilà*, a book.

Once we have a written book in front of us, we, like Firmicus, can analyze. We

can deduce. We can arrive at conclusions. We can go beyond the limitations of memory and verse. But it is a time-consuming process. Best to wait until we have that cushy appointment, the patron & his annual stipend. Let us set our deductions down in a book that will earn his undying respect, and perhaps in reward, a slave, or a daughter's hand in marriage.

The ideal solution would be oracular pronouncement, backed up, when necessary, with written analysis. A learned man should have both tools at his disposal. The modern world equates literacy with intelligence, illiteracy with poverty & deprivation. Study of oral transmission proves this to be simplistic. The ability to use the mind is the key.

Aside from rote learning of letters & numbers, many literate people have minds that function poorly. Many have short attention spans & an almost complete lack of memory. Illiterates, by contrast, often have highly developed minds & well-developed memory.

Oral tradition could be the solution for a long-standing mystery: It is known the **New Testament** was not written until nearly a full century after the Crucifixion. No one knows how the original Evangelists could possibly have lived so long.

But if Mark, Matthew, Luke and John composed their works in verse, those words would then have entered the oral tradition of the day. This was, after all, how most knowledge was spread at the time, since only the wealthy had actual books, and the wealthy, then as now, can rarely be bothered to read them. (I am a bookseller by profession, I know these things.) Individual sentences in the Bible are termed "verses", but I am unable to determine if the earliest versions were actually written as verse. I would appreciate help by a Biblical scholar.

Oral transmission of the new Christian doctrine would have worked fine, up until

the moment it began to spread so fast that memorization could not keep up. At that point, popular demand would have forced the early Church leaders to set the Gospels down in writing, along with various other teaching materials (Paul's Letters, etc.). That they did this grudgingly is evidenced by the fact, to this day, they have set almost nothing else down. Protestants notably failed to realize there was more to the Church than the Bible, but this is enough of a digression.

## ADVERTISEMENT

I have a Christmas wish. I can tell you the story of the **Aquarian Age**, devise a **Theory of Astrology**, reconstruct Beethoven's program to his **Eroica**, reveal that **Mozart** lived to the age of 70, to say nothing of other trivialities or more personal explorations.

How do I do it? My Moon, in the third house in Leo, is opposed to my Sun, in the 9th house, in Aquarius. This dynamic house polarity, along with support from Mercury, Pluto, Saturn, Neptune, Jupiter, Mars, Uranus, the ascendant, and, indirectly, Venus, enables me to pit common third house ideas against ninth house philosophical concepts. The results are innovative, concrete ideas. I first did this at age 13. Since the age of 18, I have done nothing else.

Traditionally people such as myself are obliged to take students, that something might be preserved, but, in fact, few actually do, due to temperament & environmental factors. But there was another solution: A patron, usually a prince or king.

My Christmas wish is to find a patron, a Syrus, a Mavortius. A billionaire, frankly. In exchange for an annual stipend I propose to create one unique scholastic work per year, dedicated to the patron. I caution this kind of relationship is traditionally rocky, and I am not cheap.

