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Review of: A Brief History Of Ancient Astrology by R. Beck

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A Brief History of Ancient Astrology by R. BECK

Review by: James Evans

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finds of recent Polish excavations in the hermitages of Naqlun (in Fayum, Lower Egypt). Archaeological and papyrological evidence offers a more nuanced picture than that found in literary sources like the *Apophthegma patrum* (the collection of the sentences attributed to the first hermits) and the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*. For example, in a communal kitchen of the hermitage in Kellia (Fayum), finds of animal bones, remains of fish and containers for wine suggest that monks did not follow the strictly frugal and vegetarian diet prescribed by rules (51). Moreover, we find monks with private possessions which may include even a slave (Catalogue no. 36).

To sum up, the volume contains deep insights into a fascinating topic, and at the same time shows how much is still to be done in this area. In that respect, Shenute's library represents a very significant case study, since a considerable part of it is not only still unpublished but also dispersed in many institutions across the world as a result of the 'uncontrolled' manuscripts trade of the antiquities market in modern times (8–10).

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HISTORY

BECK (R.) **A Brief History of Ancient Astrology.** Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. Pp. xiii + 159, illus. £50. 9781405110877 (hbk). £14.99. 978140511-0747 (pbk).

As Beck points out, although we know a lot about ancient astrological doctrine, tracing a *history* of ancient astrology can be problematical. For Beck, a 'meaningful development implies progress' and, he asks, 'by what standard can we measure progress in a pseudo-science?' (xii). He does grant that one could provide a historical dimension to the story by treating the emergence of astrology in Mesopotamia and its reception in the Greek and Roman worlds. But astrology was such a conservative art that, despite the many divergences between the ancient authorities, it is hard to make out a central story line, as we can in the case of ancient astronomy.

Of course, the absence of agreed-upon standards of progress doesn't prevent us from writing histories of art, religion or philosophy, so

Beck's plea may strike some as a bit too positivistic. But even if we were surer of the development of astrology over time, great problems would still remain. For example, as Beck points out, our sources often exaggerate the antiquity of astrology, sometimes ascribing its principles to the ancient Egyptian wise men Nechepso and Petosiris, or claiming that the supporting data had been collected by the Chaldeans for hundreds of thousands of years. (Diodorus says 473,000 years, while Pliny puts it at 490,000 or 730,000.) In fact, the oldest Babylonian horoscopes are only of the late fifth century BC, and astrology began to flourish in Greek Egypt only in the second century BC.

Although writing for a series called *Brief Histories of the Ancient World*, Beck has given us, not a history, but a lively and readable introduction to astrological doctrine. Through successive chapters, Beck introduces the 'places' and their connections with human life, the signs of the zodiac and their aspects, the planets and their qualities. The important concepts are illustrated by well-chosen examples from the astrological manuals of Ptolemy and Vettius Valens, Manilius, Dorotheus of Sidon and Firmicus Maternus. Beck has it just right when he says, 'Astrology is not the sleep of reason but reason hyperactively spinning its wheels' (80). Throughout, Beck eschews completeness, striving rather to treat the basic doctrines, as well as to give some idea of their variety.

Beck is resourceful at explaining complicated geometrical relationships – why, for example, the ascendant and the mid-heaven are not always 90° apart. (That this was also considered tough to explain to general readers in the first century BC is clear from the trouble that Geminus takes with this question in the second chapter of his *Introduction to the Phenomena*.) Beck is writing for readers with little geometry, so his discussion of the effects due to the obliquity of the ecliptic becomes at times a little tortured. And he doesn't mention the ancients' use of convenient tables (tables of ascensions) to cut through the nasty mathematical bits.

There is not a lot of new ground broken in this book. But one of the more original aspects is the detailed study of six of Vettius Valens' horoscopes, for people of different birth dates who were all involved in a near shipwreck. Beck gives a fascinating account of Valens' effort at a semi-empirical test of his rules for calculating the number of years to a crisis, based on the periods of

the planet and the rising times of the signs in which the planets are found. A final chapter discusses some socio-political implications of astrology.

In this short account, Beck has naturally not been able to cover every aspect of the story. The discovery in 1967 of ivory astrological tablets at the Gallo-Roman site of Grand (Lorraine) provided important insights into the material circumstances of an astrological consultation (J.-H. Abry, *Les tablettes astrologiques de Grand (Vosges)* (1993)). The recovery of astrological ostraca, in both Greek and Demotic, in close association with Egyptian temples, provided some important clues about the cultural loci for the practice of astronomy, at least in Greek Egypt (D. Baccani, 'Appunti per oroscopi negli ostraca di Medinet Madi', *Analecta Papyrologica* 1 (1989) 67–77 and 7 (1995) 63–72). These are subjects that readers will have to investigate elsewhere. But for a clear introduction to ancient doctrine, in a brisk, conversational style, *A Brief History of Ancient Astrology* can be highly recommended.

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LEHOUX (D.) **Astronomy, Weather, and Calendars in the Ancient World: *Parapegmata* and Related Texts in Classical and Near Eastern Societies.** Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xiv + 566. £68/\$125. 9780521851817.

Calendars across all cultures in the world have traditionally relied on the observed or measured motions of the celestial bodies: the sun, the moon and the stars. In the Western world, this dependency can be traced back directly to the ancient Greeks, who used all three celestial motions to underpin their various calendars and schedules. Astronomical lore of this kind is perhaps best known from Hesiod's *Works and Days*. But apparently from the fifth century BC onwards Greek astronomers formalized specifically star data into *parapegmata* – stone tablets inscribed with day-by-day entries for the appearance or disappearance of stars. Sometimes, but not always, these day-entries were accompanied by notices of changes in the weather. These were set up in public spaces in the cities, and so presumably had a civic significance beyond the narrowly astronomical. Many of the leading

astronomers of antiquity played a role in the development of the *parapegmata*, whether or not they actually produced them themselves – the list includes Meton, Euctemon, Eudoxus, Callippus and Ptolemy. In literary form, details were extracted from various sources and combined into compilations and published either in their own right by astronomers or subsumed into agricultural 'handbooks' by literary authors. In all, about 60 *parapegmata* survive in epigraphical and literary form.

The *parapegma* was last dealt with in any significant manner in a series of publications by Albert Rehm in the first half of the twentieth century (notably in *RE* 18.4, 1295–366). Several papers by Berthold van der Waerden treated the topic in the second half of the century, but because he based his work on Rehm's, it is still the latter's views which lie behind subsequent scholarship. Unfortunately, as Lehoux has demonstrated in previous work, Rehm mixed fact and hypothesis in his conclusions, and a rigorous critique of his work shows that there is a need to relay the foundations for work on the subject. Furthermore, Rehm and van der Waerden were primarily interested in simply reconstructing the *parapegmata* as lists of observations, rather than situating them into a wider context. There has been a need for some time, then, for a fuller account of these once-influential almanacs or 'event-markers', and for a re-evaluation of the astronomical and cultural context of the *parapegma* in Classical Greece. Lehoux's book goes a long way towards explaining the historical and cultural context of these almanacs, all the way back to the eastern parallels to the Greek and Roman examples.

The work is divided into two parts: part I, '*Parapegmata* and astrometeorology' (1–143) discusses the forms and development of *parapegmata*, while the much larger part II, 'Sources' (145–491), provides what Lehoux's background PhD did not, the *parapegmata* in the original Greek and Latin and in translation. Appendices provide lists of authorities cited in *parapegmata*, and tables of correspondence for *parapegmata* listed by Lehoux, Rehm and Degraasi (*Inscriptiones Italiae* (Rome, 1963)). Lehoux presents most of the sources in full, with an accompanying translation. Missing (though recognized) are the much longer passages from the agricultural writers, such as Columella, Varro and Pliny, but, on the other hand, it is excellent now to have available to a wider readership the *parapegmata* of P. Hibeh 27 and Ptolemy's *Phaseis*. Only with al-Biruni's