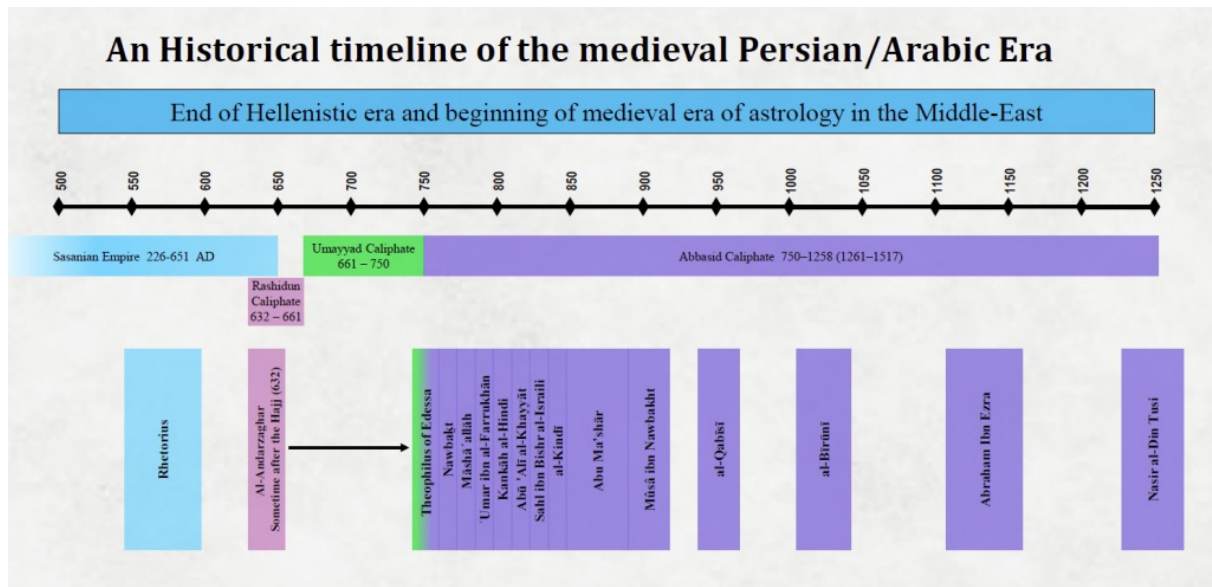


# A General Overview of the History and Development of Mundane Astrology as Seen in Medieval Astrological Teachings



There is generally accepted by the scholars and historians of scientific and astronomical development, three distinct early stages of astrology. Mundane astrology is most likely the oldest branch of astrology!

The first stage (ca. 1700 – 1600 B.C.E.) involves the omen lore of the ancient cultures. The most extensive omen lore that has been uncovered is contained in a compilation comprising some 68 tablets referred to as *Enuma Anu Enlil*. The tablets themselves were found in the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (668-626 BC) in the ancient city of Nineveh, [\[1\]](#) and were copies, written in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. However, evidence also suggests the collection of omens is much older than the tablets found in the library, and the original series may have been assembled somewhere probably back to the Old Babylonian period at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. There is no older recorded astrological record than these! Amongst these records is also the very controversial collection which is tablet 63 called, the *Venus Tablets of Ammizaduga*. These are believed to have been composed under king Ammi-saduqa who ruled Babylon from 1646 to 1626 BC. These records list 21 years of Venus' data for the consecutive first and last appearances of Venus as an evening star

and as a morning star. This data includes dates of the first and last appearances as a morning star, as an evening star and durations of invisibility, along with appropriate omens. The list of Venusian dates was copied and recopied extensively, which some historians and scientists believe led to the embedding within the text, certain corrupt astronomical details.[2] This table became a standard collection of astronomical and meteorological omens, predicting favourable times for coronations, harvests and births.

An example of these texts is as follows:

*“If on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz Venus disappeared in the west, for 7 days remaining absent in the sky, and on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of Ab Venus was seen in the east, there will be rains in the land; desolation will be wrought.” (Year 8)*

Astronomically what is happening is that Venus “disappearing in the west” (occidental) occurs after her first station and is Rx moving under the Sun’s beams[3] (heliacal setting) for 7 days and then emerging from the Sun’s rays, still Rx, on the 7<sup>th</sup> day oriental of the Sun. It should be noted that, according to the later astrologers, it would be her retrogradation while oriental that in fact rendered it somewhat malefic and not its orientality. I might also add this first period of ancient Babylonian astrology never conceived of a planets apparent retrogradation in their astronomy!

There are references to Venus, as early as 3000 B.C.E. Certain archaeological evidence from Uruk[4] on clay tablets have lead archeo-historians to believe that at this early stage, the symbols represented in tablet, carry no more meaning than an early identification to some celestial identity. One clay tablet found at the site says, “Star Inanna”, and another contains symbols for the words “star, setting sun, Inanna”. *Inanna* is believed to be Venus, known later as *Ishtar*. Eventually these same symbols developed, in cuneiform writing, into a sign that means “god” and is placed before the actual names of deities. If the relationship between gods and the sky were not already explicit enough, then this development in Mesopotamian writing would appear to confirm it.

The second stage,[5] while quite similar to the first, was different in that there appears in this period the first zodiac and the placement of planets by their longitude in the signs as opposed to the earlier placement of the planets relative to fixed stars and the Sun. There are also some significant differences in the astronomical observations of

this period. These observations are much more sophisticated (similar to diaries) containing much less omen lore and more astronomical detail, *e.g.* the number of days in the preceding month; the time between moon-rise and sunset on the last day of the month on which the moon rises before sunset; the times between sunset and moon-rise on the next day; the time between moon-set and sunrise on the last day on which the moon sets before the sun rises; the time between sunrise and moon-set on the next day; the time between moon-rise and sunrise on the last day on which the moon is visible; the longitudes of each of the planets in the signs of zodiac they are situated in; details of eclipses; for each of the superior planets, the date of its first or last visibility, the date on which it starts or finishes retrograde motion, and the date on which it rises as the sun sets; the date of first or last visibility of Venus or Mercury and conjunctions of the moon or planets with stars near the zodiac! Even more unique was the practice of recording the actual mundane observations correlated with the preceding astronomical observations, *e.g.* the river level in Babylon; the price of barley, dates, sesame, *etc.*; the weather; if bad and any and all interesting news!

One of the most significant observations was the great attention paid to the transits of Jupiter through the signs at the rate of approximately one sign per year and a “*Metonic*”, or 19-year cycle with 7 extra months that were the conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn! Based on observing and compiling lists of phenomena and recurrence cycles of the planets, these periods’ astronomers could calculate, reasonably accurately, the positions of the planets at any time in the future. Ptolemy records and modern scholarship does not dispute this that accurate and systematic eclipse records were kept from 747 B.C.E. onward into the Hellenistic period after the conquests of Alexander the Great.

So already, by this time there was a sophisticated change. In the older omen lore, principally Venus, the Sun and Moon (lunations) are recorded. However, in this second period all of the planets are seen in relation to the signs they were in and their relation to each other! It must be remembered that in the ancient omen lore, Venus for example was observed and events recorded on that isolated observation. And this may have bearing on why, by the time personal horoscopy appears (ca. 400 B.C.E) a more comprehensive view of all the planets and their relationship to each other was in the making! There is no evidence that it is the Greeks who made these changes! Plato says in his work that it was ‘foreigners’ (Chaldeans) that

introduced the idea of planets = Gods into Hellenistic culture at this time! It is the fact that we actually know so little that is the problem and there are several alternatives as to the chain of events. For example it is quite possible, even probable, in this same period under the Assyrian, Babylonian and then Persian empires that this doctrine also enters Egypt, particularly under the Babylonian Empire in 600 B.C.E. but probably the greatest cultural exchanges occurred under the Persian Achaemenian Dynasty of Cyrus (and after Darius), the King of Medo-Persia (550 B.C.E). Zoroastrianism was the Dynasty's largest religion and it was monotheistic.

My point in this is to bring to the readers awareness that it is just as possible and feasible that it is the Babylonians themselves (perhaps with Persian influence) who, for example, narrowed Venus' scope in astrological matters while broadening the scope of all the planets significations! For example in the Medo-Persian Empire, the deity Mitra was worshiped. In the Greek Herodotus' Histories (I.131) Mitra is given as the Persian name for Aphrodite and the deity's significance was "Judge of Souls" and was assigned the domain of human welfare, aiding in the destruction of evil and the administration of the world. It would appear that as astronomy became more sophisticated so did the 'gods'. Vedic Mitra is the patron divinity of honesty, friendship, contracts and meetings. I think it is rather interesting to see that all these traits became astrologically attributed to the Venus we know in the third stage of Classical Western astrology along with the attributes worshiped most of Aphrodite or Venus, *i.e.* fertility and rites of purification *etc!*

Thirdly is the emergence of a very complete personal horoscopic astrology somewhere between 400 – 200 B.C.E. and is the foundation and centre piece to what we have recorded in the Hellenistic astrological texts. While we lack many of the earliest root texts attributed to such authors as Nechepso and Petosiris and Critedon *etc*, many of these writings are embedded in the texts of authors such as Vettius Valens, Paulus, Porphyry, Firmicus Maternus and Rhetorius. What is unique is the scope and sophistication of the astrology itself which seems to almost 'magically' appear. The period 200 B.C.E. to 600 C.E. is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, is that astrology is predominantly genethliological[6] along with cathartic[7] and secondly, mundane astrology[8] seems to vanish entirely! Historians and scholars such as the late David Pingree, remark often about this clear lack of historical record until the 3rd century C.E and the Sassanian Dynasty in Persia. Yet even those

historical records are mostly embedded in the works and writings of the later Arabic and Persian astrologers.

One possible explanation for this disappearance is that under the Roman Empire, mundane prediction, *i.e.* prediction of events concerning rulers, government and kingdoms, was prohibited. Likewise early Christianity and its influence put chains on serious investigation of mundane matters. It would appear that this branch, the 'mother' branch if you will, was only kept alive in remote places only marginally under Roman and Byzantine control, such as India and Persia. As the Roman Empire split there is also some evidence of limited mundane prediction in the Byzantine Empire concerning rulers but based in large part on natal astrology concerning those rulers. And this is why I say there was a fourth stage of development in Western Astrology, which took place with the rise of the Islamic Empire; for it was in the 700's that all vestiges of both eastern (Byzantine) and western Roman influence were 'flushed' from the middle east.

By 762, Baghdad was rebuilt and with it, in 813, was founded the House of Knowledge (*Bait ha Hikma*) establishing a place in which to assimilate the wealth of knowledge the Arab Dynasty had inherited. Observatories were constructed near Baghdad and Damascus. Translation of Greek, Syriac, Persian and Sanskrit literature, philosophical and scientific works were enthusiastically, if not passionately, pursued. Astrologers, who had long fallen from favour in both Byzantine and Roman cultures, now found benefactors and patrons in the Caliphs of the Islamic Empire.

It was amid this cultural rebirth that we find the emergence of what can only be described as a blending of ancient Babylonian Omen lore, Indian science and history and the more contemporary astrological technical style of Hellenistic astrology. This period provided the congregation of several lines of astrology, *i.e.* that of the Hellenistic astrologers, Persian (or Chaldean) astrologers, and elements from Indian Astrology. Without a doubt, this period and place became a «crossroads» and «conjunction» of the main astrological influences, cultures and teachings.

The most important 'renaissance' in this period was the re-emergence and development of mundane astrology. When you study the Islamic Era astrologers, there is an old world 'feel' to it just as much as there is new innovation. It contains the canons of much of the ancient



Chaldean astrology from the second stage epoch, with special emphasis on the conjunctions of the superiors. In fact, many of the delineations we find in Abu Ma'shar's work have 'echoes' from the distant past of Omen Lore.

A typical example of Venus from the old omen tablets reads:

*"In the month of Sivan, on the twenty fifth day, Ninsianna [that is, Venus] disappeared in the east; she remained absent from the sky for two months, six days; in the month Ulul on the 24<sup>th</sup> day, Ninsianna appeared in the West – the heart of the land is happy. In the month Nisan on the 27<sup>th</sup> day, Ninsianna disappeared in the West; she remained absent from the sky for seven days; in the month Ayar on the third day, Ninsianna appeared in the east – hostilities occur in the land, the harvest of the land is successful."*

As you can read, each phase of Venus is recorded and an 'omen' corresponds to the phases. First Venus is oriental and direct 'disappearing in the east' where she is under the Sun beams while direct it takes over two months until she reappears in the west (occidental) and 'the heart of the land is happy'. Then of course she reaches the limit of her course, stations and retrogrades 'disappearing in the west' while she is combust again and emerges in the east (still moving Rx) and they say hostilities occur in the land and the harvest is successful etc.

Curiously, we find this same type of delineation in Abu Ma'shar for example when Venus was in Leo and it was the Lady of the Year or a time-lord he says:

*"If it [Venus] is at its greatest distance [when she stations], it indicates that disasters come to kings or to some of their women. If it is retrograde, it indicates anger occurring to kings, and grief and anxieties. If it is under the rays, it indicates disasters occurring to the women of kings. If it becomes visible in it [i.e. emerging from combustion], it indicates an abundance of honour for kings and nobles, the soundness of affairs of the rulers, the breaking out of illness resulting from heat and humidity, together with a large number of rumours and wars, and a large number of beasts of prey."*<sup>[9]</sup>

Echoing his ancient for-bearers, Abu Ma'shar gives distinct significations for each of Venus' phases in relation to the Sun. By this time however, delineations and significations are somewhat more sophisticated and included such observations as stations and retrogradation. What occurred in this period was a unique blending

of Hellenistic technique with, by all appearances, the remnants of very ancient omen lore!

In this convergence, there were some obvious innovations<sup>[10]</sup> in the joining of mundane and genethliological astrology. For example, we have the personal testimony of the Greek astrologer, Theophilus of Edessa, who was court astrologer to the Caliph al-Mahdî.<sup>[11]</sup> In the introduction to his treatise, *Labours Concerning Military Inceptions*, he tells us something of his own contribution to the innovation of new methods of mundane prediction.

*“7 So I, having pondered this, and having learned that a method of approach to [the subject of] war is seldom found among the ancients, except only [the inquiry] whether in the cosmic completions of events there will be war and captivity in the land (clearly leaving aside the most specific [issues], that is to say, especially the military campaigns against the enemy, those launched by the enemy, or the siege of cities and the tyrannies), I also write on the things that are set in motion or sharpened at specific times, by two armies facing each other, taking up a position, or pitched over against each other, on which matters the accurate records in the books of the ancients are found to be helpless.  
8 Having given heed to precisely these things, I deemed it necessary to shift and divert some inceptions of war from the [current] natal and inceptional systems<sup>[12]</sup> which contained at the same time the plausible and the true, precisely because, having put many to trial, I was compelled (as you know) by those who held power at that time, to get busy with these things at the time when we made the military campaign with them eastward to the land of Margiana, where we withstood mutual misfortunes of war, with much icy-cold and immoderate winter, as well as the greatest fear, and opposition beyond measure.”<sup>[13]</sup>*

This is an interesting statement by Theophilus since it could well indicate that he was the astrologer who first put together the things to be considered in charts concerning War such as we find repeated later by Sahl, Haly and finally in Bonatti’s treatise *On War*. But equally interesting is his use of not only what appears to be a general teaching from mundane astrology, but also he joins these to the genethliacal teachings. We find both of these influences in following astrologers like Abu Ma’shār who describes the general significations of the planets in mundane astrology in this wise,

*“Related to the superior planet furthest from the world of generation and corruption, i.e. to Saturn, is the indication for matters of Beginnings like*

*religions, dynasties, and whatever lasts for a long time, since it is like the beginning for the other celestial bodies in terms of height. Related to the planet following it in order, i.e. to Jupiter, is the indication for laws and the like, which are the culminations in perfection for the other things, which are preliminary and initiatory. Related to the third of these planets in order, i.e. to Mars, is the indication for wars, strifes, and the like, being, as it were, the decline to the final ends of things, because the ends of things indicate destruction of their orderly arrangements after their perfection, and corruption of their regularity....The greater luminary and its influences...came to indicate kings and masters, since they are distinguished more strongly than others....the inferior planets and their influences...came to indicate the occurrence of things of short period and duration, because of their relation to the third movement and the swiftness of their motion. The divisions of the three inferior planets, as it were, follow the first three divisions in indication because of the strength of the first divisions' compulsion over them and their connection with them. Related to the highest of the inferior planets, i.e. to Venus, is the indication for marriages, clothes, and the like, since it corresponds to the first division, indicating beginnings. Related to the planet next to it in order, i.e. Mercury is the indication for writing, calculation, and the like, since it corresponds to the second division, indicating perfections. Related to the planet next to it and third in order, i.e. to the Moon, is the indication for movement, migration, journeys, and the like, since it corresponds to the third division, indicating declines."* [14]

As you can see, these significations are not typically Hellenistic. As just a side note, it should be obvious from what is written here why it is not the "type of Sun" that characterizes a nation. It was Saturn that signified for the *beginnings* of new kingdoms and dynasties in this classical approach to mundane astrology, not the Sun, which is simply 'fall out' from modern Sun sign astrology. But we also find in his mundane techniques this 'borrowing' from genethliological astrology. For example in his method of finding out the length of a rulers' rule he says,

*"[19] As for knowing the quantity of their life spans from the second division, [15] – i.e. from the time of their accession – one looks for it from the Ascendant and from the midheaven, and one derives for it the haylāğ and kadhudāh just as one does in nativities. Then one moves the degree of the Ascendant for his body, [16] and <that of> the midheaven for his authority, and the periods for both of them are rotated together. Then, if the prorogation and the period of the two together arrive at misfortune, one judges the cutting off <of life>. If the corruption is of one of them without the other,*



*one should judge from that corruption. If the degree of the Ascendant arrives at the malefics, and the misfortune is strong, one should judge cutting off for him. If <the misfortune> is not <strong>, one should judge illness for him, if the prorogation from the degree of the midheaven is sound. If the corruption is from their motion without the (?) Ascendant, one judges corruption of the government. If corruption is from the two, one judges cutting off."*[\[17\]](#)

Here Abu Ma'shar is clearly and deliberately 'borrowing' a technique straight out of the teaching of the Hellenistic genethliological branch of astrology which we find in Dorotheus or Valens for example where a 'Hyleg' (Valens=predominator) and 'Alchocoden' (Valens=ruler) is determined and from which we are to make a judgment concerning the length of years of the ruler as well as direct the Ascendant and Midheaven through the terms (in ascensional degrees) to support the delineation and find out the 'when' of delineation!

This period did not only see the fusion of an established genethliological body of astrology with ancient omen lore, but it also was a fusion of distinct Indian teachings.[\[18\]](#)

The mundane astrology which emerged contained a particular teaching concerning what should be considered as the 'beginning' of mundane matters and the relationship of astronomical cycles to history.[\[19\]](#) This particular doctrine concerned the return of all the heavenly bodies to some place where they originated[\[20\]](#) and the implication that each return brings about a similar, if not the same, sequence of worldly events. For example, we find that today this conception is attached to the *Saros* cycles of solar eclipses. Any two eclipses separated by one *Saros* cycle share very similar mechanical characteristics. They occur at the same node with the Moon at the same distance from Earth and at the same time of year. Bernadette Brady, for example, has written,

*"These families or cycles have beginnings, middles and ends, and were first discovered by the Babylonians. Any one cycle will run for well over a thousand years, making the study of individual eclipses equivalent to sitting and watching a giant hardwood tree grow."*[\[21\]](#)

What Ms. Brady does not recount in her work on eclipses is that this conception and astronomical convention was the very heart and soul of the conjunctions of all the planets and in particular those of Jupiter and Saturn. In the same way that *Saros* cycles had beginnings,

middles and ends, so do the greater conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn. In fact, all of these conjunctions, including the eclipse cycles were presented in a hierarchical form by the Medieval Arabic astrologers; especially Abu Ma'shār.

*"[12] Since the things from which to deduce advanced knowledge of the occurrences of general <types of events> and their particular instances in future times are gained from six elements, <here they are:> The first is from the celestial bodies' positions in the horoscopes of the revolution of the years in which the conjunction of the two superior planets[22] occurs in the spring tropical sign[23], happening every 960 solar years. [13] The second is from the celestial bodies' positions in the horoscopes of the revolutions of the years in which their conjunction occurs when they shift from one triplicity to another, occurring every 240 solar years. [14] The third is from the celestial bodies' positions in the horoscopes of the revolutions of the years in which the conjunction of the two malefics[24] occurs in Cancer, and from the period of their conjunction in it, occurring every 30 years. [15] The fourth is from the celestial bodies' positions in the horoscopes of the revolution of the years in which their conjunction occurs in each sign, happening every 20 years.*

*[19] As for the fifth <element>, it is from the celestial bodies' positions in the horoscopes of the times at which the conjunctive and oppositional Beginnings[25] arrive which precede the parallelism[26] of the greater luminary with the point of the beginnings of the tropical signs and at the time of its parallelism with them. [20] The sixth is from the celestial bodies' positions in the horoscopes of the times at which conjunctive and oppositional Beginnings arrive which precede the parallelism of the greater luminary with the beginnings of <each of> the signs and at the time of its parallelism with the point of their beginnings.*

*[21] In the presence of one of these times that we have defined, one looks at the horoscopes of those times, and the location of the celestial bodies' in them, and all their natural and accidental conditions <which result> from their essence[27] and from <their relation to> the Sun and the sphere,[28] and one discovers (1) the nature of their indication from the planets which have predominance over the principal positions, and (2) the time of it according to what the indicators point out." [29]*

While this thought on 'beginnings' and cycles existed in ancient Greek thought[30] it was only in Babylonian and later Sassanian and Indian astrology that it developed to a particular and specific practice.

It is these innovations and teachings which ultimately made their way into Europe in the late medieval period through astrologers like Guido Bonatti and made up the body of mundane astrology in the renaissance of people like William Ramesey who compiled a long treatise called *Astrologia Munda*.<sup>[31]</sup>

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[1] modern Tell Kuyunjik, Iraq

[2] This is where the controversy lies which I will not go into as it is not particularly relevant to our discussion.

[3] This Rx conjunction was known as the lesser conjunction of the Sun.

[4] Uruk was an important early Sumerian city in southern Iraq.

[5] Beginning sometime between 700 to 450 B.C.E

[6] I.e. natal astrology

[7] I.e. astrology pertaining to elections and interrogations

[8] the earlier Chaldean astrology

[9] Volume I, Part Five, Chapter Four, §[8], *Abu Ma'shar On Historical Astrology: The Book of Religions and Dynasties (On the Great Conjunctions)*, by Abu Ma'shar; translated and edited from the original Arabic by Keiji Yamamoto and Charles Burnett; published by Brill©2000

[10] By innovations, I do not mean invention, but rather a new application of axioms, method and postulates in astrology to an extant body of work. The word innovate comes from the Latin word, *innovare*, meaning, "renew" or "alter". For example,

progressions are a late medieval invention rather than an innovation and were the creation of a new method.

[11] See Benjamin Dykes Introduction (p.5) in *The Astrological Works of Theophilus of Edessa*, translated from the Greek by Eduardo J. Gramaglia.

[12] That is, natal and electional astrology; this is a clear indication that Theophilus is conscious of breaking new ground, not simply in terms of subject matter (war), but in terms of how to approach a chart.

[13] **Labours Concerning Military Inceptions**, Chapter 1:7-8 (p.50) *Astrological Works of Theophilus of Edessa*, translated from the Greek by Eduardo J. Gramaglia, edited by Benjamin Dykes PhD, Cazimi Press 2017

[14] Volume I, Part One, Chapter One, §[7], *On Historical Astrology: The Book of Religions and Dynasties (On the Great Conjunctions)*, by Abu Ma'shār; translated and edited from the original Arabic by Keiji Yamamoto and Charles Burnett; published by Brill©2000

[15] The reference is to the two kinds of methods he mentions earlier in this discussion where he advocates using the chart of the ingress of the Sun into Aries for the year the ruler accedes as well as the chart of the time the ruler accedes to power.

[16] Cf. *Tetrabiblos*, IV, 10, ed. Robbins, p.449 "We shall apply the prorogation **from the horoscope** to events relating to the body and to journeys above; that from the Lot of Fortune to matters of property; that from the moon to affections of the soul and to marriage; that from the sun to dignities and glory; that from the mid-heaven to the other details of the conduct of life, such as actions, friendships, and the begetting of children."

[17] 'Cutting off' refers to the rulers demise and fall from power which at that time was usually because of his death!

[18] With the Indian astrologers came their astronomical theories and tables, which were based upon the concepts of a grand

conjunction at some remote epoch and of an integer number of revolutions or cycle of the planets in a certain time period. Furthermore, unlike Ptolemy's tables, the Indian tables gave positions in a fixed zodiac. These principles had already passed to the Persians two centuries earlier. The result was a set of tables, such as the *Zîj al-Shâh* or *Tables of the King*, which were similar but not identical to the Indian tables. Both Mâshâ'allâh and Abu Ma'shar utilized these or similar tables in preparing their "astrological World histories." Their greatest contribution was to make known to the Arabs the Indian invention of special signs for the numerals; or what we have mistakenly called *Arabic* numerals because it was through Arabic writings that Western Europeans became aware of them. Prior to this period, the Arabs, like the Greeks, had used the numerical values assigned to the letters of the alphabet, so that the Arabic letter *dal*, like the Greek letter *delta*, had to serve not only as the letter *d* but also as the numeral 4. The Indians had also invented a symbol for zero, which was lacking in the Arabic and Greek alpha-numerals.

[19] Kankah the Indian, who came to the courts of Al Mansur, wrote two books on the Conjunctions of the planets for example.

[20] This was called the *World Year*.

[21] *The Saros Cycle – Eclipses come in Families*, by Bernadette Brady – <http://www.BernadetteBrady.com>

[22] *I.e.* Saturn and Jupiter

[23] *I.e.* the sign Aries

[24] *I.e.* Saturn and Mars

[25] *I.e.* New Moons and Full Moons

[26] *I.e.* the *transit* or *ingress* of the Sun into the sign of Aries

[27] *I.e.* their natural significations



[28] *I.e.* whether combust, retrograde, oriental or occidental of the Sun and accidental signification derived from their house position and the house(s) they rule.

[29] Volume I, Part One, Chapter One, §[7], *Abu Ma'sar On Historical Astrology: The Book of Religions and Dynasties (On the Great Conjunctions)*, by Abu Ma'shar; translated and edited from the original Arabic by Keiji Yamamoto and Charles Burnett; published by Brill©2000

[30] See G. De Calastay, *Annus Platonicus*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1997

[31] This was in fact the fourth treatise of his book *Astrology Restored*.