CHAPTER 7

Porphyry, the Oikodespotēs and the Personal Daimon

So it would be worthwhile to track down what region your star and your daemon especially designated you to live in and cultivate, for there they favour you more.

Marsilio Ficino

This chapter will investigate astrological connections to the personal daimon, with a focus on the writings of the Neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyry who, in addition to his treatises on philosophical, religious and ethical topics, also wrote an astrological treatise. Porphyry, like many in his cultural milieu, believed in a personal guiding daimon who aids and encourages its human being toward virtuous behaviour, even as that daimon ratifies, administers and fulfils the choice of life made by the soul prior to incarnation. Building upon ideas drawn from Plato (especially the Myth of Er), Porphyry relates this personal daimon to the astrological technique of finding an oikodespotēs, or house-master, of the birthchart. The planet designated as the oikodespotēs of the nativity imparts the spirit of the personal daimon (usually called οἰκεῖος δαίμων or ἴδιος δαίμων) which goes with the soul when it becomes attached to a body at birth. In his Letter to Anebo (14a–d, 15a–b), Porphyry takes up the idea of finding the oikodespotēs of the nativity in order to ascertain a personal daimon. He gives instructions for finding it astrologically in his Introduction to the Tetrabiblos (Chapter 30).

This chapter will examine these topics in detail, as well as looking at the ways selected Neo-Platonists dealt with the daimon, and at astrological writings

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1 Liber de vita coelitus comparanda, 23.27–29 (Kaske and Clark, 370.27–28, 372.29). ‘Proinde operaepretium fuerit indagare, ad quam potissimum regionem habitandam et excolendam te tum sidus daemonesque tuus ab initio designaverit, ibi enim magis aspirant.’
2 Eἰσαγωγή εἰς τὴν Ἀποτελεσματικὴν τοῦ Πτολεμαίου, edited by Emilie Boer and Stefan Weinstock in CCAG V/4, 185–228. (Hereafter the Introduction to the Tetrabiblos.)
3 Both adjectives are used, e.g. Porphyry, Life of Plotinus, Letter to Anebo; Hephaestio, Apotelesmatica; Plutarch, De genio Socratis (all οἰκεῖος); Proclus, Commentary on Plato’s Republic; Zosimus, Περὶ ὀργάνων καὶ καμίνων γνήσια ὑπομνήματα παρὶ τοῦ οἱ στοιχείου (ἴδιος). Iamblichus uses both οἰκεῖος and ἴδιος in De mysteris.
about the oikodespotēs. It begins by exploring the views of two representative Neo-Platonists, Plotinus and Iamblichus, on the personal daimon and astrology.5 The focus will then turn to Porphyry’s views on the oikodespotēs and the personal daimon.

1 Neo-Platonism and the Personal Daimon

Daimons are an important consideration in Neo-Platonism. In addition to interest in a personal daimon, the Neo-Platonists also acknowledge and try to deal with both good and bad daimons. Iamblichus insists that only a good daimon can be one’s personal daimon,6 but Neo-Platonists also recognize that bad daimons exist in the world and cause misery.7 Astrology is also discussed by several Neo-Platonists (including Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus), including its role in fate, free will and choice.8 In Porphyry especially, these discussions also involve the personal daimon.

Modern scholars generally mark the beginning of Neo-Platonism with Plotinus.9 However, the ideas of Platonism develop along a continuum, so this designation is more chronological than philosophical (and, of course, unknown in antiquity). Conceptions of the daimon in Neo-Platonism come out of those in Middle Platonism, perhaps best exemplified by Plutarch, as we saw in Chapter One, and in Apuleius and other Middle Platonists like Numenius.

5 Timotin, Démonologie, 309–14, discusses the personal daimon and astrology in a Neo-Platonic context, from a more philosophical and less astrological viewpoint than I shall use. His discussion thus complements mine.
6 DM IX.7 (Clarke/Dillon/Hershbell, 282.2–4). The idea that a personal daimon is only good appears in Menander, fr. 714 (cited in Luck, Arcana Mundi, 172).
7 See Porphyry, De abstinentia 2, 38.4, 39.3, 40.1–4, etc.