Beginning with the pioneering research of Aby Warburg, politics has never been far away from the attention of historians of astrology. It is fair to say that the inverse observation has much less validity: a few exceptions notwithstanding, historians of politics have had virtually no interest in astrological discourse as a possible source of political theory, advice, legitimacy, or empowerment. This is somewhat remarkable, in view of the wealth of good historical studies demonstrating and analyzing the many ways in which astrology impinged on past politics.

Part of the explanation probably lies in a tendency of political historiography to essentialise ‘politics’, and to approach it as a universal and autonomous societal phenomenon, differentiated—at best—by local constitutions and external ‘influences’. Such an approach automatically implies an under-valuation of themes like the precise relation between rule and rationality, or between politics and myth; themes on which the study of astrology offers a special perspective. Another explanation, of course, lies in the credibility of a post-theological doctrinal authority called ‘science’. This authority’s valuation of astrology as irrational and/or superstitious is often adopted as a methodological premise by historians, justifying the facile labeling of past instances of astrological discourse as either ‘marginal’ or ‘irrelevant’.

The latter option was already evoked—and questioned—in the introduction of Auguste Bouché-Leclercq’s classic *L’astrologie grèque* (1899):

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1. The author wishes to express his deep gratitude to Brendan Dooley, for his invaluable maieutics in bringing this chapter to life.
For a long time, it has been believed—and this is perhaps still the case—that divination in general, and astrology in particular, have played a small role in history. Of course one finds that the oracles and prognostics of diviners intervene at all times to provoke or prevent, hasten or hold back the most serious actions; but it is supposed that, for men of State or army leaders, these were pretexts rather than reasons—commodious means to use popular credulity—, and that things would have happened just the same, or almost, without this intervention.  

Bouché-Leclercq’s answer to these suggestions remains as valid today as it was in 1899: the historical record shows, with overwhelming clarity, that past rulers engaged astrology as a source of rationality rather than credulity.

Focusing on Europe’s early modern past, this chapter seeks to do three things. First of all, to trace the different historiographical routes which historians have pursued for the study of astrology and politics. Secondly, to survey some of the main results which have been reached by following these routes. Thirdly, to point out a few under-acknowledged phenomena in the relation between astrology and politics in this period, and suggest promising routes for future research into this fascinating and important topic.

**Renaissance Politics in the Historiography of Astrology**

With the historiography of politics, the existing historiography of astrology appears to share at least two general presuppositions: (1) politics is a universal and autonomous societal phenomenon; (2) Renaissance politics is best approached as a transitional phase in which ‘the city’ or ‘the state’ provide the backdrop for violent disputes between different claimants to a societal monopoly on violence. Breaking with the medieval absence of such a monopoly (as well as with the medieval pattern of politics as a game played only in certain parts of society, and essentially ‘happening to’ the rest), Renaissance politics also unwittingly prepared the advent of 17th century absolutism. Against this shared background, astrology is generally approached as something which impinges on the phenomenon of rule, altering either its historical content or its very stability. More precisely, historians appear to have carved out three ways in which astrology impinged on Renaissance politics.

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