CHAPTER FIVE

SQUARE HOROSCOPE DIAGRAMS IN MIDDLE EASTERN ASTROLOGY AND CHINESE COSMOLOGICAL DIAGRAMS: WERE THESE DESIGNS TRANSMITTED THROUGH THE SILK ROAD?

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Many horoscopes from antiquity were written down either as plain texts or as tables. The few diagrams found in them all share the same crude circular form. The more frequent medieval horoscope diagrams in Greek, Arabic, and Latin codices and documents show, in contrast, a quadratic frame divided into nine squares, with diagonal divisions of the four corner squares. Although unknown to antiquity, this layout was common in Chinese hemerology (the method for determining favorable and unfavorable days), where the twelve yellow and black spirits were arranged in an identical scheme. Presenting a precise example of the transmission of scientific knowledge from China to the Islamic World would be significant because the matter has too often been discussed in vague terms (such as those of lunar mansions and alchemy, for instance).

Horoscope Design in Antiquity

The oldest known individual horoscopes come from ancient Mesopotamia.1 Written on clay tablets from the sixth to the first century BCE, Akkadian sources describe planet positions at the time of a person’s birth, either as a single text or as a linear list of positions. Horoscopes found in other regions of the ancient world are similar.2 In Egypt, several Demotic,3 an old Coptic,4 and many Greek horos-

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1 Rochberg 1998.
2 For Qumran text horoscopes, see von Stuckrad 1996.
3 Neugebauer 1943; Neugebauer and Parker 1968.
4 Černý, Kahle and Parker 1957.
copes, mostly on papyrus, have been discovered. Out of the more than one hundred Greek documents, only one papyrus from Oxyrhynchos (15–22 CE; fig. 5.1), eight graffiti from Dura Europos (176 CE and 219 CE; figs. 5.2; 5.3; 5.4), one graffito from Abydos (353 CE; fig. 5.5), and an engraving on a wooden object from Palestine display diagrams. Despite their distant provenances, they look the same: a circle divided into four sectors by two lines that indicate the horizon and meridian lines, or, as in the Abydos graffiti, twelve sectors by six lines that indicate the twelve stellar houses. The circle represents the zodiac; the names of the twelve zodiacal signs are written inside the circle, while the names of the four cardinal points remain outside the circle. Ancient art often represents the zodiac as a circle or a ring, often bearing the images of the zodiacal signs. This standard iconographical pattern needed no explicit inscriptions or symbols. The circular shape in horoscope diagrams was therefore self-evident. The word ζωδιακός was originally an adjective, and the full expression often used is κύκλος ζωδιακός, or “zodiacal circle.”

Literary transmission has preserved many ancient Greek horoscopes. The largest collection is Vettius Valens’s Anthologiai (second century CE), with 123 examples. According to David Pingree’s critical edition, no horoscope diagrams were found in the extant codices (eleventh to seventeenth century), and only some numerical tables of theoretical content illustrated the text. The Apotelesmatika of Hephaistion (ca. 415 CE) contained several horoscope examples in its main part, but only one diagram appears, in a codex of the thirteenth century. In the epitomai to the work (twelfth to fourteenth...

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6 Neugebauer and van Hoesen 1959: 18, no. 15/22.
7 Neugebauer and van Hoesen 1959: 49, no. 176; 54, no. 219, I.
9 Ovadiah and Mucznik 1996.
14 For example, Vettius Valens 1986: 308–315.