

The Origins and Concepts Behind The Horoscopic House Systems:

Whole-Sign, Regiomontanus, and Placidus

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Recent translations and research by scholars of ancient texts have provided astrologers with a wealth of information. This information has expanded our knowledge and understanding of the ancient and medieval astrological systems, particularly the origins surrounding a multitude of house systems used by today's astrologers. Currently, there are over twenty-two different house systems portrayed throughout various astrological literature. The history of mathematical methods for casting the horoscopic houses has long been presented as a complex subject. Jim Tester points out in *A History of Western Astrology*, "...that the houses may have actually originated with the Egyptian divisions of the ecliptic." ¹

The word Horoscope translates, 'that which marks or designates the hour, time, or season.' The horoscopic point was considered the most important point representing a particular moment in time, and translated means 'the sign that it is in as being the first place, or of a particular system.' The rising degree was considered by the Greeks to be the most important horoscopic point. It is defined as the degree of the zodiac, which is rising over the horizon in the eastern arc at the moment of a specific event in time.

¹ Tester, Jim, *A History of Western Astrology*, (New York, New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), p. 25

The astrological houses of the zodiac provide astrologers with a division of the celestial heavens or 'space' if you will, around the timing of an event. An event can represent a myriad of instances; the moment of a birth, a mundane event, a horary question, etc. Once the time of an event is known, so too is a specific distance along the equator known. By dividing space into a diagram of wedges, and divisions, representing the houses of the astrological chart; astrologers are able to create, and provide order within an astronomically defined structure. As a whole, astrologers have never been able to agree upon a universally accepted method of house division. This fact is reflected throughout history by the various calculations used in the division of the ecliptic to create the mundane houses.

As Bruce Scofield illustrates in his *Astrological Chart Calculations*, "House systems are ideal mathematical constructs applied to the cycle of the day or the geometry of the sphere."² The imaginary lines known in astronomy as the Celestial Sphere form a coordinate system also known as Sky Maps, and are quite literally, the framework for which all astrology is based. These great astronomical circles are the meridian, horizon, prime vertical, celestial equator, polar axis circle, and the ecliptic; they are used by the astrologer as starting points to define, and project the sphere of space into a system of houses. In using the great-circles which radiate from the poles and intersect with the equator, ecliptic or prime vertical we can determine the location of house cusps within various house systems.

² Scofield, Bruce, *Astrological Chart Calculations, An Outline of Conventions and Methodology* (Amherst, MA: One Reed Publications, 2002), p. 18

There are several approaches for creating a house system with each providing significant variations in the locations and sizes of the houses. The oldest one takes a point on the ecliptic and divides the ecliptic according to a systematic scheme, resulting in a zodiacal system known as the Equal House and *Whole-Sign* system. Here we find that the Ascendant is taken as a starting point whereby thirty-degree increments are added to each subsequent house cusp. The projected house system is where the circle is divided and projected onto the ecliptic as in Porphyry, Capanus and *Regiomontanus*. These are also considered part of the quadrant method of house division, whereby a circle of the sky is divided into four sections defined by the horizon, and the meridian. Each of these quadrants are again divided into three sections using various methods of calculations, ultimately creating the twelve houses of the zodiac, as referenced by Scofield.³ Another popular method is the Time-based system, which includes the Alchabitius, *Placidus* and Koch house systems. This system according to Kevin Burke in his book *Understanding the Birth Chart*, takes the semi-arc of a major mundane sensitive point and trisects it; this trisection then becomes the basis for the house division.⁴

In calculating a house system, Tester believes a common division problem arises. This is due to locating the positions where the rising and the setting points are fixed since they are the points where one rises above, and the other is setting beneath the horizon, which of course varies with the latitude. In order to solve this problem, three circles are involved, each with its own poles:

³ Scofield, Bruce, *Astrological Chart Calculations*, p. 9

⁴ Burk, Kevin, *Astrology, Understanding the Birth Chart, A Comprehensive Guide To Classical Interpretation*, (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2001), p. 169

- 1) The Equator
- 2) The Ecliptic
- 3) The Horizon

To divide any of these one can draw lines, or great circles through the poles, or the longitudinal lines. One circle must run through the Ascendant to obtain the first house, and one circle through the setting point to obtain the Descendant the seventh house. It is here that we see the different house systems and their alteration of house division allowing for different planetary locations.⁵

The early astrologers paid no attention to the astronomical Midheaven. Ptolemy mentions the 'MC' several times in the *Tetrabiblos* often referring not to this point, but to the 10th house as it was referenced in earlier times. The Greeks, as Hand indicates, interpreted the Midheaven as the whole 10th house, and used the primary word 'action' to describe it.⁶ Originally, the modern astrologers considered the Midheaven to be the 'cusp' of the 10th house, but in the lower latitudes it would fall into either the 9th or 10th house. At some point after the 2nd century, astrologers began to insert the point where the ecliptic intersects the meridian into horoscopes, and defined it as a sensitive point calling it the 'Midheaven'.

During the Renaissance the modern methods of house division were determined with the Astrolabe. Astrolabe in Greek means, '*taking the stars*'. Obviously known to the Greeks, as North indicates, "...going back in history perhaps to Hipparchus, but not used in the Middle Ages until its reintroduction by

⁵ Tester, Jim, *A History of Western Astrology*, p.172

⁶ Hand, Robert, *Whole Sign Houses*, p. 19

the Arabs.”⁷ The Astrolabe was the most important observational instrument before the invention of the telescope. Astrologers used the astrolabe, along with a book of tables to aid them in the calculation of a horoscope. The astrolabe enabled astrologers to project the sphere of the universe onto a plane. With it, Tester explains, they were able to observe the placement of the planets, find the time, latitudes, heights and distances, for constructing the horoscope (*the ascendant*) and calculating the mundane houses.⁸ North states, “It is a property of stereographic projection that circles project into circles, so the lines are easily constructed once three key points on each have been identified.”⁹

The earliest known house system is that of the *Whole-Sign Houses*, which is also known as the sign-house system. This system is based on the ecliptic as is the Equal House System, where it divides the zodiac into twelve equal houses. Hand tells us that this system really wasn’t a house system as house systems are understood today but instead, “the signs of the zodiac, themselves, were used as a house system.”¹⁰ Here we find the rising degree of the zodiac designating the sign it is located in as the 1st house. And, regardless of the rising sign degree the first house begins at zero degree of the sign it falls in and ends at thirty degrees of the sign it falls in. Subsequently each successive house of the zodiac wheel begins at zero degrees and ends at thirty degrees.

The earliest Arab era authors all used the Whole-Sign house system. It wasn’t until the 2nd generation of Arabic astrologers, in the 8th and 9th Centuries

⁷ North, J.D., *Horoscopes and History*, (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1986), p. 56

⁸ Tester, Jim, *A History of Western Astrology*, 156-7

⁹ North, J.D., *Horoscopes and History*, p. 59

¹⁰ Hand, Robert, *Whole Sign Houses*, p. 1

C.E. that we find the Whole-Sign system replaced with Alchabitius. For modern astrologers today the Whole-Sign system can seem perplexing when confronted with a late degree rising sign. And, according to Hand the ancients did distinguish between planets in the 1st place (house) above the horizon versus below the horizon. ¹¹

Passages from Maternas have reinforced Hands view that the Whole-Sign 'cusps' are as follows:

"In each sign, the degree that the Ascendant occupies in the 1st sign is the degree of the cusp. This means that the Whole-Sign 'cusps' are the same as the Equal House system cusps. The difference is that in the Whole-Sign system the 'cusps' are not the beginnings of the houses. "

This is because in classic medieval sources all systems indicate the cusp as being five or approximately five degrees into the house, not at the beginning of the house. In Whole-Signs, the cusp floats about the house and can be anywhere, even while the place coincides with the full extent of the sign.

The **Regiomontanus** system is associated with Johannes Muller (1426-1476), who went by the alias of Regiomontanus. This system was known before Johannes Muller began using it, and was popular during the Renaissance. North reminds us that, Muller desired to simplify the standard procedures of his time, where many others may have tried but often succeeded in only complicating already convoluted principals. ¹² What Muller did, was invent a computation of house and auxiliary tables for what has since been called the Regiomontanus system of houses. This set of house tables published in 1490 swept across the whole of Europe in the 16th century causing a change from the standard used at

¹¹ Hand, Robert, *Whole Sign Houses*, p. 25

¹² North, J.D., *Horoscopes and History*, p. 21

that time, Alchabitius. He also published an ephemeris for the years 1474-1506. Here we have a projected quadrant, also known as the fixed boundary method, where we find the equator is divided equally into 30-degree arcs that are then projected onto the ecliptic by means of house circles passing through the north and south points of the horizon. The horizon itself is one of these house circles and marks the ascendant and descendant.

- ❖ The point known as the ascendant is the point of the ecliptic, which is rising at the time in question, also known as the Horizon.
- ❖ The point where the meridian cuts the ecliptic is called the Midheaven.
- ❖ The point on the ecliptic which is setting is the Descendent
- ❖ The point opposite the Midheaven is called the IC

The sizes of the houses in this system, as Scofield describes, gradually and progressively change, and are less prone to distortion at high latitudes than the quadrant system Campanus. ¹³

With this system it is possible to draw a set of fixed lines on an astrolable plate for a particular latitude, and where the ecliptic is intercepted by these lines, there then are the houses. This was an effective rapid method for casting the Regiomontanus houses. North believed the great advantage to the boundary method of Regiomontanus, while using the astrolable plate for a given latitude, was that nothing needed to be moved once the ecliptic was connected for the time in question. “Where the fixed circles cut the ecliptic scale, there will be the cusps of the houses.” ¹⁴

¹³ Scofield, Bruce, *Astrological Chart Calculations*, p. 20

¹⁴ North, J.D., *Horoscopes and History*, p. 59

The **Placidus** House system is one of the most complex of the house systems, and was developed in the 17th Century, by a Spanish astrologer, Placido de Titus (1603-1668), who was generally known as Placidus. A Monk and professor of mathematics at the University of Pavia, he was the author of a revolutionary treatise of three books; *House Division, Primary Directions, and Secondary Directions*. Placidus is often called the 'semi-arc system' due to its time-based nature. Placidus originally used a method to calculate the intermediate house cusps that used 'poles.' Unfortunately, Holden advocates, using this method did not result in an exact solution for Placidus cusps, but only an approximate one. This created a great deal of confusion among astrologers that lasted for three centuries. ¹⁵

With several variations of calculations currently in use, understanding the complexity of the Placidus mathematical basis is often quite challenging. Based on trisections of arcs, by dividing the time it takes the Ascendant to become the MC, each degree of the zodiac traces its own diurnal and nocturnal arc. Hand describes the diurnal arc's path as it is traced out between the rising and setting, and the nocturnal arc path between setting, and the next rising of planets and the ecliptic degrees. ¹⁶ The Placidus house cusps are located on the ecliptic by the diurnal circles that intersect the ecliptic at 1/3 and 2/3 the distance from the meridian to the horizon, explains Scofield. ¹⁷

¹⁵ Holden, James H., *A History of Horoscopic Astrology from the Babylonian Period to the Modern Age*, (Tempe, Arizona: American Federation of Astrologers, 1996), p.169

¹⁶ Hand, Robert, *Whole Sign Houses*, p. 44

¹⁷ Scofield, Bruce, *Astrological Chart Calculations*, p. 23

The Placidus system later became the 19th and 20th century standard because it was the only one for which affordable tables were readily available. ¹⁸ Placidus was the last major astrological figure of the early modern period. It could be argued that the natural approach to life, as shown by the Ascendant, moves through time as the person grows and develops. This notion would seem to fit most people world-wide, and goes some way (together with Raphael's) to explaining the popularity of the Placidus system today.

Astrologers today do not yet have clearly defined rules in regards to agreed upon house systems, and as Jim Tester writes, "Yet in modern times, with all the practice and experience, we still have no topic on which astrologers disagree more heartily." ¹⁹ Holden argues that the quadrant systems fail at, and above the artic, and Antarctic circles and therefore, "the only reasonable house systems are the original Sign-House system (still in use in India) and its derivative the Equal House system." ²⁰

¹⁸ Holden, James H., *A History of Horoscopic Astrology*, p.23

¹⁹ Tester, Jim, *A History of Western Astrology*, p. 240

²⁰ Holden, James H., *A History of Horoscopic Astrology*, p.125

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