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Medical Astrology in Early Western Europe

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Medical Astrology in Early Western Europe

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When that great light of Greek medicine, Hippocrates, was born c. 460 BC Greece was in its ascendancy. To it's West the lands were peopled by those the Greeks called "barbarians". It is to these peoples that we must turn to establish the state of medical astrology in early Western Europe (pre 500AD). In doing so, we must examine three things.

Firstly, did they possess sufficiently advanced astronomical learning? Secondly, did they use an evolved medical lore? Thirdly, did they have a doctrine or philosophy, which allowed a correlation between the affairs of heaven and effects on earth?

There is evidence, right across the region that today forms Western Europe, of astronomy. Certainly, Stonehenge and other megalithic structures functioned as lunar calendar observatories. It is also recognised that these structures were established long before the arrival of the Indo-Europeans proper.

Stonehenge, for example, begun c. 2500-3000 BC, clearly demonstrates considerable astronomical knowledge, as well as engineering skill. Archaeologists have determined that people of the "Beaker Culture" were responsible for building Stonehenge but cannot say how or where these people learned these skills.

Consequently, as with the Egyptian civilisation, the first evidence we have of their skills exhibits them at peak performance. Hoyle ²

¹ Formerly published as **European Medical Astrology Prior to the Year 500AD**

² Hoyle, Fred, **On Stonehenge**, Freeman, W.H. & Co., San Francisco, 1977, pp. 32, 113.

has shown that structures built after Stonehenge were degenerations, rather than refinements, from the astronomical point of view.

The question for us is what can we conclude from this. Possibly, from such observatories, and from the priests who staffed them, the later Celts and Germanic peoples may have learned a good deal of their sky lore, but this presupposes that there was a continuum lasting over millennia. On the other hand, as happened with the Egyptian civilisation, there may have been a hiatus which broke the connection between the builders of the great monuments and those that were to come after them. Their astronomical knowledge may have come from other quarters. For example, the sky lore of the Germanic peoples at least seems to belong to a common Indo-European body of knowledge relating to the sky. We find various elements of it cropping up in India, Persia, Greece, and the British Isles. We know too, for example, that the Germanic peoples relied heavily on the lunar calendar. We learn from the Romans that the Germans would not fight before the New Moon and that the women of the tribes were the custodians of the method of determining the phase of the Moon. Their assemblies were held on either the New Moon or the Full Moon and they measured time according to a lunar calendar.

They also had knowledge of the solar year and represented both the solar year and the lunar month by an eight-spoke wheel. They also knew of an eight-year cycle (undoubtedly based on the inferior conjunctions of Venus ³ which completes the pattern of an eight pointed star in the heavens every eight years) according to which they ordered sacrifices intended to ensure the healthy and fertile condition of their communities. It is though more difficult to show what they knew about the other planets ⁴. There is also evidence that they knew of both the sidereal period of the Moon and its synodical period. The eight-fold division of the synodical month they related to the sexual urge, and to crises in fevers.

³ It is astrologically noteworthy that the same glyph used for the eight-year Venus cycle, by the Celts, was also the Wheel of the Dharma in India.

⁴ References in the **Edda** can be interpreted to show that there was a knowledge of the planets however, it should be borne in mind that the **Edda** was recorded in the 13th century AD.

The sidereal year must have been known, but does not seem to have played much of a role in what has come down to us. There is no evidence, so far as I am aware, of any kind of sign division of the ecliptic though the eight-fold division of the lunar month was employed to determine directions. The Compass Rose is a survivor of this tradition. The eight-fold division was also felt to be of significance in the process of generation and of the passing away of things. In the north, where the angle of the ecliptic is closer to the horizon, the eight-fold division of time and space works much better than it does in the Mediterranean regions.

Thus, we can see that the astronomy of some of these Western Europeans, the northern Germanic people, and Celts in particular, was reasonably sophisticated despite their seeming lack of a detailed knowledge of the planets. They had the rudiments of astronomy for the establishment of some form of medical astrology.

Next, we must look at their medical lore. Medically, all Western peoples, including the early Romans, preferred simple, empirical medicines found nearby. Herbs and animal substances with their medical, culinary, magical, and poisoning powers formed the basis of a their medical practise, such as is typified by the Norse feminine magical practise of *seithr* ⁵.

Indeed, prior to the arrival of the systematic, theoretical medicine developed by the Greeks, medicine and magic were inseparable in Europe. When one fell ill, folk remedies were relied upon. Should these fail then the sorcerer was called in. In order to find the causes and cures of the illness, that shamanic figure would employ a combination of herbal medicine, sung charms (like the mantra of the Hindus, or the chanting of the American Indians), and spiritual or magical techniques such as astral projection. Massage was known, raising the possibility of some kind of bio-energetic lore, as was hypnosis, employed in order to enlist the patient's own healing powers.

⁵ Old Norse

Several examples of indigenous European healing methods have come down to us. An example of which may be found in the following early Roman prayer:

*Father Mars, I entreat and beg
you...to keep at bay, repulse and
take away disease, known and
arcane...and to give health to me,
my house and my household."*⁶

An example of a Nordic medical/magical practice is found in the following charm

Phol (Balder) and Woden

*fared to a wood;
there was Balder's
foal's foot sprained.
then charmed Woden
as well he knew how
for bone sprain
for blood sprain
for limb sprain.
Bone to bone
blood to blood
limb to limbs
as though they were glued.*⁷

The efficacy in such charms was supposed to be not only in the remembrance of a divine act, but also in the sound of the words and in the rhythm of the poem. We must also assume that the personal power of the sorcerer had effect.

⁶ Scarborough, John - **Roman Medicine**, Cornell University. Press, Ithaca, N.Y., p.16 *et seq.* This prayer was supposedly used by the Roman Cato (224 - 149 BC). Though late, Cato was known for his adherence to the old ways and resistance to the newly imported Greek science and medicine.

⁷ Singer, Charles - **Early English Magic and Medicine** Proceedings of the British Academy, Vol. IX. Taken from the 10th century AD Old High German manuscript at Merseberg Cathedral, Saxony

In a Pyrenees cave is a painting portraying an Aurignacian sorcerer dressed in skins and wearing deer antlers as a headdress. He is considered the oldest representative of the healing art, yet aside from healing he is also surrounded by pictures of hunting scenes. Clearly, he is both a hunter and a healer. This connection may well remind you of the Greek myth of Aesculapios who was tutored by the centaur Chiron in both hunting and healing. Such were his powers that he could bring the dead back to life and Zeus fearful that Mankind may escape death altogether killed Aesculapios with a thunderbolt.

Both the myth and the painted image show the physician's association with the power of life and death, and both link him to semi-human forces. Thus, we see the interface of medicine and magic in both. . Aesculapios is also portrayed with a staff around which is coiled a serpent representing the life force. It was later called in Greece and Rome *vis medicatrix naturae* - the healing power of nature.

Surgery was also known in "barbarian" Europe. Atkinson⁸ observed numerous skulls, which showed signs of dental and cranial surgery. Some were skulls that had been trepanned⁹ after the patient had been hit over the head with a club. The operation removed the pressure from the radial fracture and the patient could survive. The vast majority of these operations were probably done for magico-medical purposes, *i.e.*, to permit an evil spirit, which was causing pain in the head to escape.

Thus, while there is evidence of considerable competency in certain areas, the trepan of a skull or herbal medicine for instance, there is little or no systemisation. The methods employed seem to be have been largely empirical devoid of theory and

⁸ Atkinson, Donald T. - **Myth, Magic and Medicine** World Publishing Co., Cleveland and N.Y., 1956, pp. 15-18.

⁹ a trepan is a cylindrical saw used by surgeons for removing part of the bone of the skull.

understanding. Thus, it may be concluded that without the prerequisite level of organisation that their medical lore was not sufficiently evolved to allow the solid basis upon which medical astrology could be established.

The last matter of concern is that of a doctrine which would allow a correlation between celestial movement and terrestrial events. Though the pre-Christian Indo-European inhabitants of Europe had a religion, which emphasised a Sky God, and paid reverence to the Sun and the Moon, they did not articulate a doctrine of personal fate related to the heavens.

More than this there seems to have been a lack of theoretical structure that would allow the link to be made.

Thus, we may conclude that while some of the elements of our three requirements were present none were sufficiently codified or systematised to permit the evolution of a medical astrology such as arose in the East when Greek rationalism met with Babylonian astral religion.