

## **The Nature of Mesoamerican Astrology** by Bruce Scofield

In the history of the world, some form of astrology always appears at the onset, or shortly thereafter, of full-fledged civilization. This is true of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China. Each of these civilizations produced a body of astronomically-based knowledge that gave order and meaning to human life. In the case of Mesopotamia, the need for order was so great that its kind of astrology evolved very rapidly and was later adopted and modified by other cultures, especially that of the Greeks. It is also probably true that Mesopotamian astrological ideas were, early on, carried to India and China, where they influenced those civilization's indigenous traditions. Today, Western astrology stands almost entirely on Greco/Mesopotamian foundations while Indian and Chinese astrology show influences stemming from that tradition as well.

In Mesoamerica, today's Mexico and Central America, civilization arose about 2,000 years later than it did in Asia. As would be expected, astrology appeared early on and it continued to evolve over the centuries. No significant outside influences altered its development until the arrival of the Spanish five hundred years ago. The effects of the Spanish invasion on the indigenous astrology was devastating. Friars were brought in to systematically eliminate as much of the traditional ways as possible, to be replaced by the Christian model. Disease decimated the populations leaving few persons truly knowledgeable of the astrological traditions. Worst of all, most of the books were burned. Only a few relics, some books and an oral tradition kept what is truly a Native American astrology alive.

A number of cultures existed in Mesoamerica during the period from about -1000 to 1500. Earliest were the Olmec who inhabited the Gulf Coast region and were probably the originators of the 260-day astrological calendar which is the core of Mesoamerican astrology. Later came the Maya, Toltec, Zapotec and Aztec cultures, each one continuing and elaborating on the basic astrological themes. All of these cultures shared common astrological forms and ideas about time-counts, symbolic images and planetary phenomena. Developed in isolation from the rest of the world, the Mesoamerican tradition is unique. It did not have the extra 2,000 years to become as sophisticated as Greco/Mesopotamian astrology did, but the core elements of a powerful system are there in potential.

During the early 1980s, I became deeply interested in the possible reconstruction of the Mesoamerican astrological tradition. Trips to the Mexican ruins, study of the writings of the archaeologists and astronomers, and familiarity with the few documents that survived the Spanish conquest provided a foundation for a series of attempts to piece together the various components of the lost system.<sup>1</sup> That this had not been done to any significant degree by an archaeologist or astronomer suggests what astrologers already know -- that astrological thinking differs significantly from conventional analytical thinking. With my long background in astrology, I felt better qualified than they to take a stab at how the system could be put to use.

It appears to me that the Mesoamerican astrological tradition can be divided into three main areas. The first would be the 260-day astrological calendar and its use as both a personality matrix and a timing guide. This is the aspect of the system that comes closest to the astrology of the individual. The second area would be the mundane astrology that the Maya took to its limits, the timing of historical changes. This would correspond in some ways to Western mundane astrology. The third area has to do with planetary phenomena, particularly the planet Venus. Although it could be said that the Mesoamerican notions about Venus fall into the category of mundane astrology also, they are unique enough to warrant a separate section.

Before discussing the 260-day astrological calendar, the first of the three areas, some notes about the key principles of Mesoamerican astrology are appropriate. First, the sun, and its creation, the day, is the cornerstone on which of the system rests. In the Maya language the word kin means day, sun and time. There is no distinction made between the three. Although we know that the rotating earth makes the day, what we see is the sun in its diurnal cycle. The ancient Mesoamericans noted that specific days, and also sequences of days, had certain qualities. Twenty days, in particular, was a length of extreme importance and each day of a sequence of twenty days was given a name. Like the 12sign zodiac, the 20 named days function like an evolutionary spiral, a sequence of life stages indicated by symbols and cycling through the basic forces of the four directions. Astronomy and numerology also meet in Mesoamerican astrology and the number twenty is applied to a count of years as well. Astrologers, who use day-for-a-year progressions, should have no trouble with this concept.

At the core of Mesoamerican astrology is the notion that time periods have meaning. In some ways this can be compared with biorhythms, where 23, 28, and 33 day cycles starting from birth are in index into biological and psychological functioning. From one point of view, Mesoamerican astrology takes this idea beyond our wildest imagination.

### **The 260-Day Astrological Calendar**

In Mesoamerican astrology the twenty named days mentioned above are grouped in sets of thirteen. The numbers from 1 to 13 cycle against the 20 named days until the recurrence of the same number and day combination. Therefore, there are twenty cycles of 13 days within the thirteen cycles of 20 days; and  $20 \times 13 = 260$ . A person's birth sign is based on the day they were born, the day-sign, with a number from 1 to 13 attached. Examples would be 2Wind, 12-Reed or 7-Alligator. The day-sign appears to symbolize the solar aspects of personality and destiny, using the terms of Western astrology. The names of the day-signs (translations of the Aztec names) are as follows, in their natural order.

1. Alligator or Crocodile
2. Wind
3. House
4. Lizard
5. Serpent
6. Death
7. Deer
8. Rabbit
9. Water
10. Dog
11. Monkey
12. Grass
13. Reed
14. Ocelot
15. Eagle
16. Vulture
17. Earthquake
18. Knife
19. Rain
20. Flower

The number preceding the day-sign indicates which of the twenty 13-day periods the birth falls into. Each 13-day period starts with the number 1, for example 1-Alligator, and ends thirteen days later with the day 13-Reed. All the days in between come under the rulership of 1-Alligator. In terms of Western astrology, the 13-day period within which the birth occurred symbolizes the lunar aspects of personality and destiny. The sign after Reed, Ocelot, begins the next 13-day sequence.

The 260-day astrological calendar, or count, cycles endlessly and is not tied to the seasons in any way. It does link precisely with the 365-day solar year every 52 years and with the Venus year of 584 days every 104 years. There are also a number of other astronomical linkages, including ones to the eclipse cycle and to Mars, that have been forwarded by astronomers. The 260-day astrological calendar's sequence has remained uninterrupted for many centuries and its correlation with the Western calendar has been constant.<sup>2</sup>

During recent years I have arrived at modern delineations for each of the day-signs. Using archaeological and historical materials, psychic/intuitive techniques and careful analysis of hundreds of cases, the symbols began to make sense and patterns became perceptible. It appears to me that the 20 day-signs are like a zodiac of sorts and that the blending of these and the 13-day period of a birth results in an interesting composite of personality that is also reflected in the Western birthchart.<sup>3</sup> It also appears that the 90th meridian marks the beginning of each day-sign's pulse which seems to occur about 11 PM there. Births outside of the area must be corrected. Why this is so is a mystery, but this should not be a problem for Western astrologers who take equally strange phenomena for granted.

In ancient times, further specifications about a birth were considered important. The hour of birth was noted and carried with it a specific symbol, and the nature of the particular solar and Venus year were probably also considered important. These are areas I have not yet explored. Apparently, the system provided for very specific information about one's relationship to the cycles of nature.

### **The Long Count and the Cycle of Katuns**

It was the Maya who developed the most comprehensive system of mundane astrology. Starting with the basic unit of the day, time periods were defined and given meaning. Here the same basic numerology of the 260-day astrological calendar was utilized on a large scale. In many respects, the Maya attempted to create a perfect temporal structure for human life that was based on natural, though slightly imperfect, rhythms. For example, one of the most important time periods, the katun of 7,200 days, is very close in length to the Jupiter/Saturn cycle and the cycle of the Moon's node. Again, the idea of biorhythms comes to mind, in particular the precise 28 day emotional biorhythm closely approximating the numerologically inexact lunar cycle. For the Maya, the purpose of human life was to conform to the cycles of nature, and these they formalized into a masterpiece of astrology and numerology.

The time-period astrology of the Maya starts with the day. Twenty days, called a uinal, is the next unit of time, which we have seen forms the basis of the 260-day astrological calendar. The next grouping is the tun of 360 days, a unit, and one that is more numerologically "correct," closely approximating the solar year. After this comes the katun of 7,200 days which is equal to twenty tuns of 360 days. Katuns are grouped in units of both thirteen and twenty. Twenty katuns, which equals 144,000 days, forms a baktun. Thirteen baktuns forms a creation epoch, which turns out to be 1/5 of the precessional cycle. Within the creation epoch there are thirteen baktuns, each

containing twenty katuns, for a total of 260 katuns. This period of time, which began on August 12, -3113, is called the Long Count, and it is the 260-day astrological calendar writ large.

It is curious that the Long Count, a period of about 5,125 years, is about to end. The last katun of the period, the 260th, begins in April, 1993 and ends December, 2012. It is this event that the leaders of the Harmonic Convergence of 1987 attempted to bring to the world's attention.

According to the traditional lore found in both pre- and post-conquest writings, each katun had a specific fate. A cycle of thirteen katuns made up a 256-year round of history. It appears that the occurrence of specific katuns does consistently coincide with specific historical trends, though this is still uncertain.<sup>4</sup> However, Western astrologers should take note that the this cycle of katuns is very close to twice the Uranus/Pluto cycle and the occurrence of the conjunctions within a particular katun is consistent.

### **The Heliacal Rising of Venus**

Although there is evidence that the motions of each of the visible planets were observed, there is no doubt that Venus was considered the most important. The alternating rhythms of morning and evening star were a celestial elaboration on the basic day created theme of light and dark. Venus was regarded as the embodiment of the god Quetzalcoatl/Kulkucan, a deity that was both divine and human, a mythical figure that symbolized both the strengths and weakness of gods and men.

From the earth-bound observers point of view, planets rise and set in a regular sequence against the horizon. The Sun, after 365 days, rises in the same position on the horizon it did a year before. Venus rises in the same position every 584 days, this being its synodic period, and the Mesoamerican astrologers divided this length of time into four segments each having a specific astrological value attached. These are inferior conjunction, morning star, superior conjunction and evening star. The first rising of Venus as a morning star just after inferior conjunction, its heliacal rising (rising before the sun), was considered the most powerful of its manifestations.<sup>5</sup>

In ancient times the heliacal rising of Venus was regarded as a dangerous time, a time when those in power might be struck down. A look at events around the time of this event does seem to back up this conclusion. Airplane crashes are more frequent and the downfall of leaders is common as well. Perhaps the Mesoamerican notion that this manifestation of Venus indicated the triumph of uncontrollable urges over the intellect is correct. Pilot error and impulsive or premature actions are often behind the news events during inferior conjunction and the heliacal rising that occurs only a few days later.

### **Conclusions**

The tradition of Mesoamerican astrology represents a unique approach to the study of nature/human interaction. The tradition as outlined above, though nipped in the bud by white conquerors using religion as a justification for their actions, could serve as a foundation for further development. In other words, the center has not been lost, just forgotten and in need of repair and upgrading. Integration of this indigenous tradition with Western astrology is quite possible without it losing its integrity.

Practically speaking, the 260-day astrological calendar may serve as a device for getting to the main themes of the birth chart quickly, and also as a symbol system that can access different information from that found in a birth chart. The field of mundane astrology should benefit from the concepts and discoveries of the Maya which are so advanced that they may eventually

constitute an entire alternate methodology. Our ideas about Venus are challenged by the findings and beliefs of the Mesoamerican astrologers. Such may expand our definitions of that planets effects and meaning for human life. Other elements of Mesoamerican astrology not mentioned in this brief summary, such as the case for a 13-sign zodiac and the influence of eclipses, may also prove of great value to modern astrologers.

#### Footnotes

1. Some of the best primary sources on Mesoamerican astrology are the writings of Duran and Sahagun, both of them friars who attempted to stamp out the native traditions by describing them for future friars. Their writings, though biased, contain information on astrology from informants who lived during the time of the conquest. Perhaps the best source of information on the astronomical elements of the Mesoamerican tradition is Anthony Aveni's *Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico*. Burland's *The Gods of Mexico* gives a good account of the myths and deities that relate to the astrological tradition. Summarizing this information, my books *Day-Signs: Native American Astrology from Ancient Mexico* and *Signs of Time: An Introduction to Mesoamerican Astrology* are both available from Astrolabe.
2. The calendar correlation question has been tackled by the best minds in Mesoamerican archaeology and astronomy and the results of nearly a century of work are in. The GMT (Goodman/Martinez/Thompson) correlation is now regarded as the one that best matches the historical and astronomical data, and it delivers the best astrological results as well. My Mayan Life Path Astrology report program (available from Astrolabe) uses the Goodman/Martinez/Thompson correlation and provides extensive delineations.
3. Experience indicates that each of the day-signs has correlations with specific sign and planet combinations. This information has proven useful in quickly accessing the most pertinent configurations in a person's birthchart. These correlations are noted in detail in my book *Day-Signs: Native American Astrology from Ancient Mexico*.
4. See my book *Signs of Time: An Introduction to Mesoamerican Astrology*.
5. The phase of Venus at birth can be easily determined using the Mayan Life Path Astrology report program.

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