

SAW Seminar:

Mathematical practices in the context of the astral sciences

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Numerical schemes in Babylonian astrology

Abstract: In ancient Babylonia astrology, in the sense of looking for information about the future from looking at the sky, uses mainly omina. These contain no computations; only distances in space and time are sometimes considered and expressed in numbers. There are a few relatively late astrological texts which do use computation. First, the so-called horoscopes have to be mentioned. The astronomical data listed in them must have been computed, but these computations are not part of the horoscope texts themselves. Then, we have texts which divide the zodiacal signs of 30° into 12 equal parts so that each part is $2\frac{1}{2}^\circ$ (“micro-zodiac”). This subdivision is used for astrological purposes and for a simple scheme to establish “rising times” of ecliptic arcs depending on the length of daylight. Finally, there are texts related to medicine which connect the choice of treatments and of drugs to positions of celestial bodies or to the calendar by means of a mathematical scheme.