

*μεγίστην δόξαν ἔχοντες ἐν ἀστρολογίᾳ*” Chaldaean Astronomy in Greek Authors

Greek astronomers speak of Chaldaean scholars as a source of astronomical knowledge or an influence on astronomical thinking. However, the name of “Chaldaean” hides the true identity of these ancient, expert astronomers. The Chaldaeans were a tribe that ruled Babylon for two periods in the history of this city — they cannot rightly stand for the whole of Babylon, or Babylonia, or Mesopotamia. However, when the later Greek astronomers reference the Chaldaeans, they are using this tribe to represent both the whole of Mesopotamian astronomy and as a general “expert” predecessor. In this talk, I will discuss the appearance of Chaldaeans in the Greek authors Geminus, Diodorus, Strabo, and Vettius Valens. I will show how these writers point to Chaldaeans in different ways that indicate their different knowledge of and interactions with Mesopotamia.

Previously, scholars have discussed the Chaldaeans in these authors in order to better understand the Chaldaeans themselves. But the record of these Mesopotamian astronomers is necessarily impacted by the Greek authors in whose work they appear. The amount of astronomical knowledge attributed to the Chaldaeans, their individual identities, and the ways in which they are described all reflect the identity of the Greek authors more than the Chaldaeans themselves. As authors from different geographical places and different experiences with the “Greek” identity make mention of Chaldaean astronomy, we can see different ideas about how the Chaldaeans are used, including shifting emphasis on astrology or astronomy and different treatment of a monolithic Chaldaean identity rather than individual astronomers or Chaldaean tribes (Dandrow 2017). We can also examine when and how the Chaldaeans are described to indicate how well known Chaldaean astronomy was at particular times (Jones and Steele 2018),

and how this eventually contributes to a conflation between Greek and Chaldaean astronomy in the Roman world (Grothoff 2016).

Using Chaldaean astronomy as a lens for examining Greek authors allows us to reinterpret the “foreign” nature of this knowledge. While astronomical information — and scientific ideas in general — certainly did circulate between the Ancient Near East and Greece, over time the knowledge becomes situated within Greek culture and the appeal to the foreign “expert” source becomes performative, if true (Oll 2014). Piecing out what information attributed to Chaldaean sources actually comes out of Babylonian astronomy and honing in on how Chaldaeans are being referenced can tell us as much about the Greek author making the comparison as it does about the Chaldaeans.

### Bibliography

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