

ASTROLOGICAL HOUSE DIVISION

by Rhys Redmond Chatham

This article will discuss the issue of house division — a topic that invites frequent debate, and sometimes heated exchanges.

Rather than advocate the use of one house system over another, I will compare some of the major house systems, discuss how they are calculated, and delineate what distinguishes one from another, allowing you to make informed choices about which one to use, for what purpose, and when.

Various house systems have gone in and out of style over the years. In my case, during the 70s, I used Campanus houses, Koch in the 80s, and switched over to Placidus in the 90s through the 2000s. I started using exclusively Whole Sign Houses (WSH) for a time, and then switched to Regiomontanus.

All these house systems worked fine and gave good results.

So, what gives? If they all work well, then why use one over the other?

Many astrologers use the house system in which they were trained but can become uncomfortable using another because some of the planets shift houses. Those studying ancient or traditional techniques will want to use a period house system. Many will use a house system simply because it is what is presently in vogue.

It is fine to use a house system because that's what your teacher used, or because an ancient, medieval, or Renaissance astrologer is said to have used it. However, after you have looked at the various techniques of house division, understanding how they work and what their underlying symbolism is based on, it seems natural that you will arrive at your own informed conclusions when it comes to choosing one house system to use over another.

At the very least, it is useful to look at some of the major house systems and compare them, so we understand how they are calculated and what they are based on. One can then see that each system has

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unique symbolic implications and strong points.

I will lay the foundation for doing that in this article.

The Categories of House Division

The house systems can be classified into three major categories:

- **Ecliptic-based houses** — These house systems divide the ecliptic itself. WSH, Equal House, and Porphyry are in this category.
- **Space-based houses** — These systems divide space in the celestial sphere in various ways and then determine how the resulting house cusps relate to the ecliptic. Campanus, Morinus, and Regiomontanus houses are space systems.
- **Time-based houses** — These divide the time of the daily rotation of the Earth and then take the timing positions and project them in various ways to the ecliptic, resulting in house cusp positions. Alcabitus, Koch, and Placidus are of this type.

Each of these systems is based on various celestial circles in the sky.

As astrologers, it is important to be able to clearly visualize each of these circles and identify their positions in the sky, for only then can we come to understand their symbolism.

The Celestial Circles:

Celestial circles or *great circles* are used in determining house cusps. They are as follows:

- The ecliptic
- The meridian
- The horizon
- The celestial equator
- The prime vertical

I will review them one by one.

The Celestial Sphere:

All the celestial circles are drawn in what is called the celestial sphere. (See Fig. 1) The celestial sphere is defined as an imaginary sphere in which the observer is in the center and within which all celestial objects are considered to lie. The celestial sphere is simply an extension into outer space of the sphere of the planet Earth.

The Celestial Horizon:

The horizon is the point where the sky meets the Earth. The celestial horizon is formed by the projection of the horizon

of the observer – or the location of where the chart was cast onto the celestial sphere. (See Fig. 2)

The Ecliptic:

The ecliptic is the circle that astrologers use to measure the positions of the planets and other objects.

The ecliptic is the imaginary great circle within the celestial sphere which the Sun traces in its annual motion, as seen from the perspective of Earth. Remember, the Sun appears to be revolving around Earth, from our point of view. We Earthlings are geocentric!

The Meridian:

When we refer to the meridian, we are speaking of the local meridian. The meridian is a great circle of the celestial sphere which passes through the zenith, the nadir, and the north and south points of the horizon. (See Fig 2).

There are 360 geographical meridians on the sphere of Earth of 1° of arc each. We simply project the local meridian (i.e., longitude line) out into space onto the celestial sphere, where it becomes one of the great celestial circles.

North and South Celestial Poles:

The North and South Celestial Poles are simply a projection onto the celestial sphere

of Earth’s geographical North and South poles. (Fig. 1.)

The Zenith and Nadir:

Another important point is the zenith, which is defined as the point directly above the observer’s head. The nadir is directly below the native’s feet at the other end of the globe extended out into space, it is the polar opposite of the zenith. Do not confuse the nadir with the I.C.; they are two separate points in the three-dimensional celestial sphere (see Fig. 2), although, in a horoscope, they appear to be in the same position. This is because, in a standard astrological chart, the ecliptic and the meridian are compressed together so that they fit on a two-dimensional page.

The Celestial Equator:

From the diagram above, you can see that the celestial equator is simply a projection of Earth’s equator onto the celestial sphere. (Fig. 1)

The Prime Vertical:

The prime vertical is defined as a great circle starting at the due east point of the observer (not to be confused with the Ascendant!), going through the zenith down to the due west point, then down to the nadir and up again to the eastern point. It is perpendicular to the local meridian, that is, it is at a right angle, exactly 90° as it crosses the meridian. (Fig. 2)

Now that we’ve reviewed the various celestial circles, let’s consider how they relate to the three categories of house systems and posit possible symbolic meaning.

Symbolic Meaning of the Celestial Circles in House Systems

ECLIPTIC-BASED SYSTEMS:

Whole Sign Houses (WSH) define the cusps with the zodiac itself, bringing the symbolism of the ecliptic as the primary circle that we must look to. The Ascendant and M.C. float in this system and do not define the start of the 1st and 10th houses. The ecliptic is the apparent path of the Sun around the Earth. Symbolically, it is a circle that is extra-lunar, it is not of the Earth, it is beyond the Moon in the heavens.

Because the house cusps in this system are determined by the 30° division of the constellations along the ecliptic and do not directly connect to the great circles of the horizon or local meridian, two other methods of house division were used by the ancients to achieve this integration.

This brings us to our next ecliptic-based house system: the **Equal House System**.

Whole Sign Houses define the cusps with the zodiac itself,

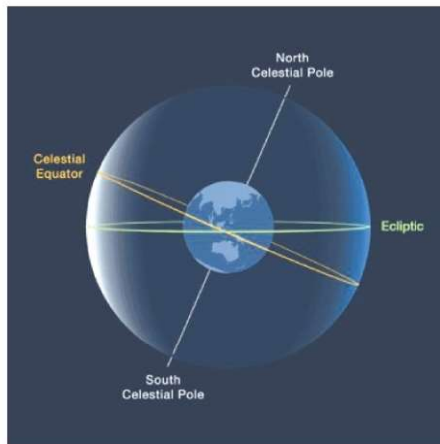


Fig. 1 – Celestial Sphere – Image: NASA

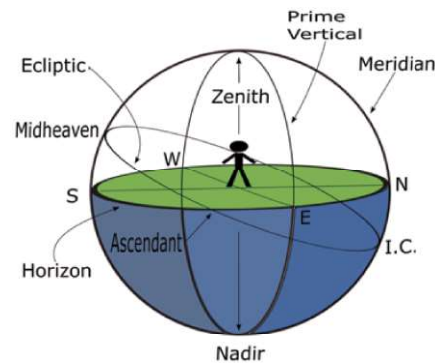
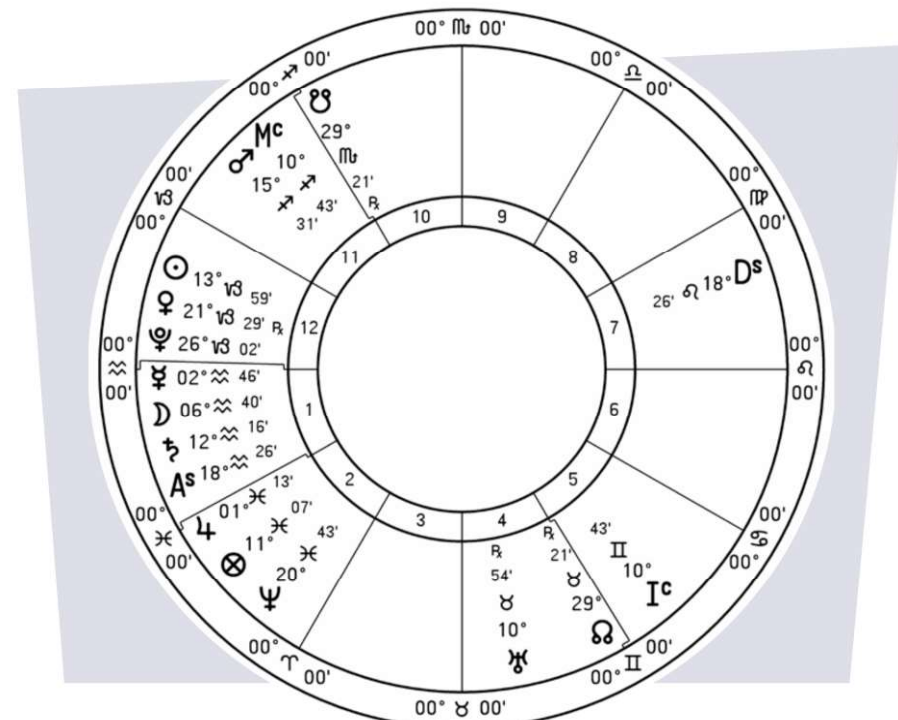


Fig. 2 – Celestial Horizon, Image: c. R. Redmond Chatham



Whole Sign Houses

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Equal House places a heightened importance on the degree of the Ascendant, which defines the starting degree of each subsequent house. This system is already more anchored to the Earth than whole signs in that the horizon takes on increased prominence. By using the degree of the 1st house to define the cusps of all the others, it centers its focus on the native, of what the person is experiencing on Earth. The 1st house symbolizes YOU, the 2nd house YOUR money, the 3rd house YOUR siblings, and so on. The Ascendant defines the start of the 1st house, but the M.C. is floating in this system as it does in WSH.

Equal House places a heightened importance on the degree of the Ascendant

In the Porphyry system, the span of the ecliptic between the horizon and midheaven is trisected equally to produce three houses.

Porphyry is a quadrant house system. In quadrant house systems, the Ascendant defines the 1st House cusp, and the M.C. defines the 10th House cusp. This creates four sectors or zones within the circle of the ecliptic, otherwise known as quadrants.

Named after the third-century Neo-Platonist philosopher and astrologer, Porphyry, this system was described by Vettius Valens in Book 1 of *Anthology*, his astrological textbook.

In the Porphyry system, the span of the ecliptic between the horizon and midheaven is trisected equally to produce three houses. This makes the houses easy to calculate. You don't need a table of houses or a computer to calculate them, you can practically do it in your head!

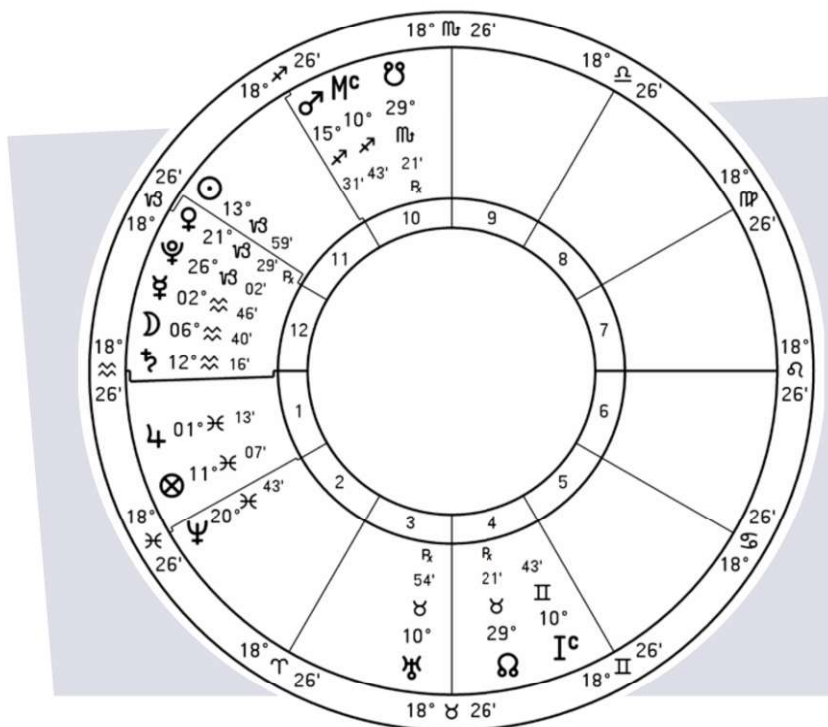
Because the number of degrees between the ascendant and M.C. varies according to location, time of day, and season, the quadrants are not of equal size. (See chart at right.)

The advantage of Porphyry houses is that the 1st House cusp starts at the degree of the Ascendant, and the degree

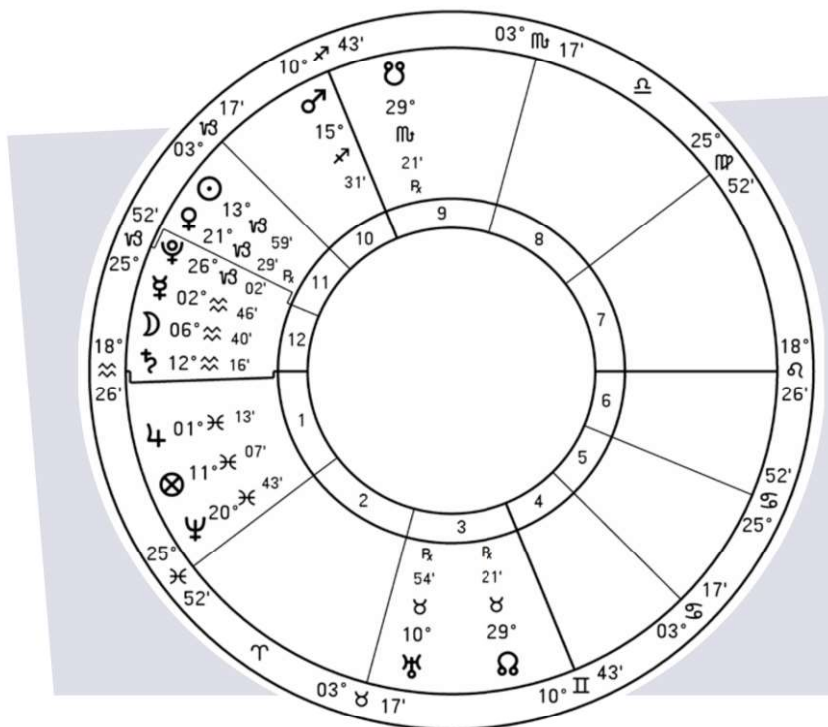
of the M.C. defines the 10th House cusp, thus underlining the importance of angularity in horoscopic astrology. In doing this, Porphyry anchors houses to the Earth in that the local horizon defines the start of the 1st House, and the local meridian defines the 10th house cusp and M.C.

One reason astrologers use quadrant house systems is for the same reason that

they use the tropical zodiac: because quadrant houses are tied to what is going on in the sublunar world. In traditional astrology, the Moon in particular holds a special role as a mediator between the zodiacal signs and the houses because she is closest to Earth, channeling the Light of all the other planets directly to our physical world. Just as the tropical zodiac is tied to the Earth's seasons,



Equal Houses



Porphyry

quadrant houses are tied in profound ways to the physical Earth itself. The idea behind using quadrant houses is that they better reflect what is happening in the terrestrial world, as opposed to the sidereal world.

Furthermore, with Porphyry, we distinguish and underline the difference between a planet being domiciled in a sign and a planet being in an astrological house.

An astrological house represents things that are linked to the Earth that we live on, the domiciles are in the heavens. For example, we could have two planets domiciled in Aquarius, with one being in the 12th House and the other being in the first. While we lose this symbolism in WSH, we get it back in quadrant systems and in systems where the 1st House starts with the Ascendant, which is why ancient astrologers used quadrant house systems in addition to WSH cusps.

Granted that the Porphyry system is more anchored to the Earth and that it is a quadrant system, it is still based primarily on the ecliptic. So, after a time, astrologers began entertaining the idea of basing house cusps on celestial circles other than the ecliptic, perhaps ones that were even more linked to Earth.

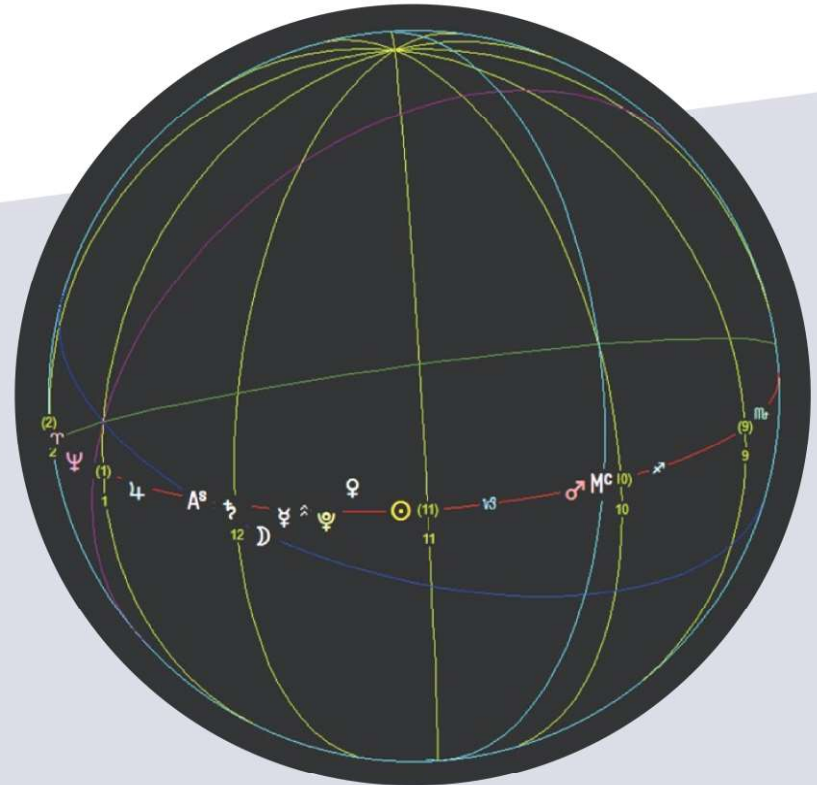
SPACE-BASED SYSTEMS

The **Morinus House System** uses the celestial equator as its starting point rather than the ecliptic. We start where the local meridian crosses the celestial equator and from there divide the equator into twelve

Because the celestial equator is simply a projection of the Earth's geographical equator into space, any equator-based system will be quintessentially tied to the Earth and events on its surface.

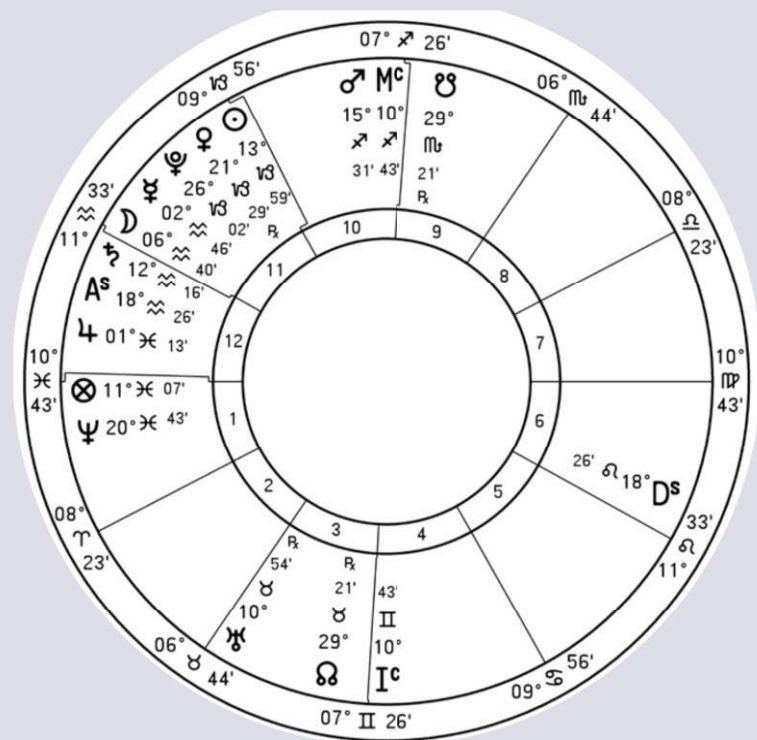
equal parts. We then project these points from the equator to the ecliptic along longitude lines drawn from the ecliptic's north and south poles to determine the house cusps. Because the celestial equator is simply a projection of the Earth's geographical equator into space, any equator-based system will be quintessentially tied to the Earth and events on its surface.

Regiomontanus Houses are like the Morinus houses, but instead of longitudinal



Morinus Houses

Dark green = equator. Meridian = light blue. Red = ecliptic. Dark blue = horizon. Latitude lines are drawn from the poles of the ecliptic (light green). Image: Janus 5



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lines from the north and south pole of the *ecliptic*, lines are drawn from the north and south poles of the *prime vertical*, projecting the house cusps from the equator to the ecliptic. This combines the prime vertical's 1st and 7th House overtones with the symbolism of the equator and its connotations of movement and the rotation of the Earth, which results in a powerful system that brings the cusps of the astrological houses down to earth. In my opinion and experience, this makes Regiomontanus an ideal system for finding lost objects!

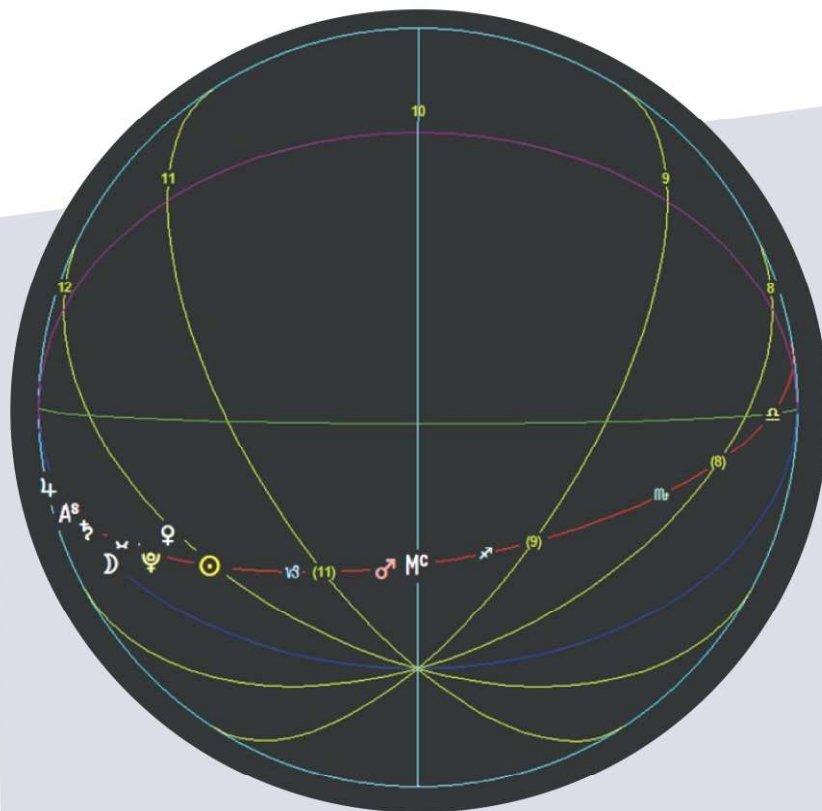
Regiomontanus in a powerful system that brings the cusps of the astrological houses down to earth. In my opinion and experience, this makes Regiomontanus an ideal system for finding lost objects!

Rather than using the Earth's equator as its base, Campanus uses the prime vertical itself as its primary circle, dividing it into 12 equal parts.

Campanus Houses take things a step further than the previous space-based systems. Rather than using the Earth's equator as its base, it uses the prime vertical itself as its primary circle, dividing it into 12 equal parts. The longitudinal lines are taken from the north and south pole of the prime vertical.

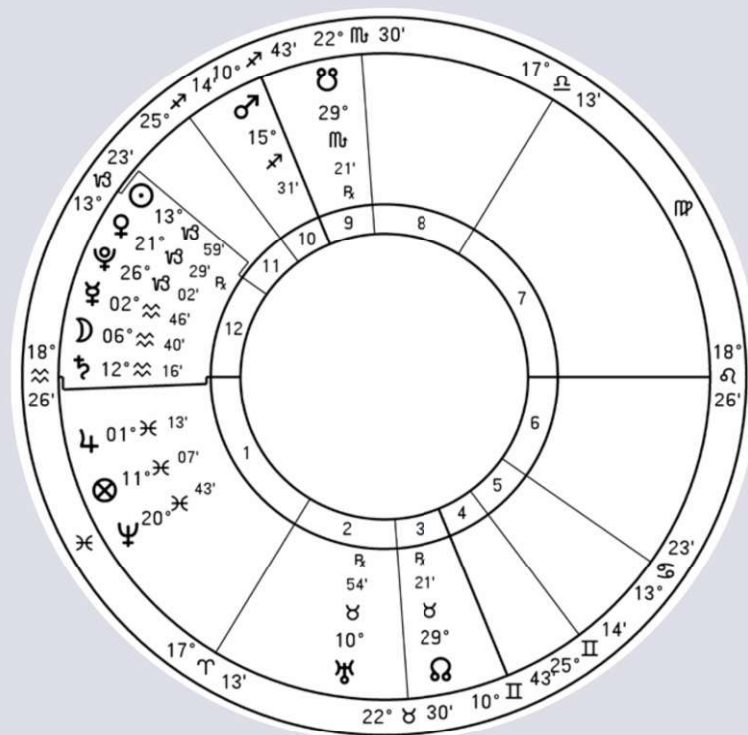
Once again, the starting point of the 10th House cusp is the M.C., but this time the 10th House starts where the meridian meets the prime vertical. Because the meridian comes from the north/south axis of the prime vertical itself and is at a right angle to it, the M.C. falls at the same longitudinal position on the ecliptic. The Ascendant locks into the cusp of the 1st House.

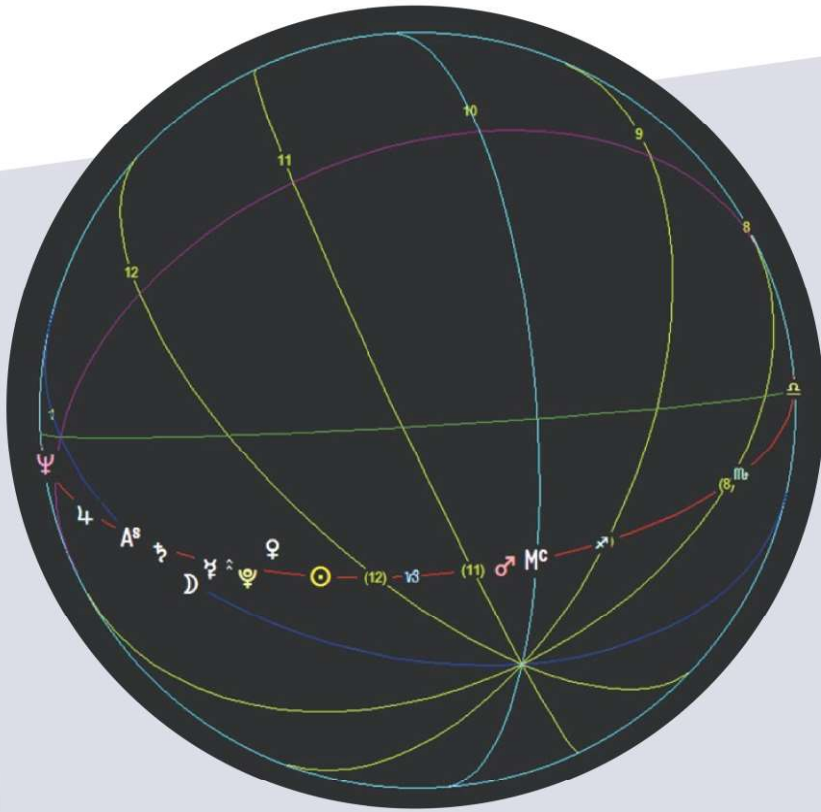
The symbolism of the prime vertical corresponds to the symbolism of the Ascendant and Descendant. Also, the zenith lies at the culmination point of the local meridian, at exactly a right angle with



Regiomontanus Houses

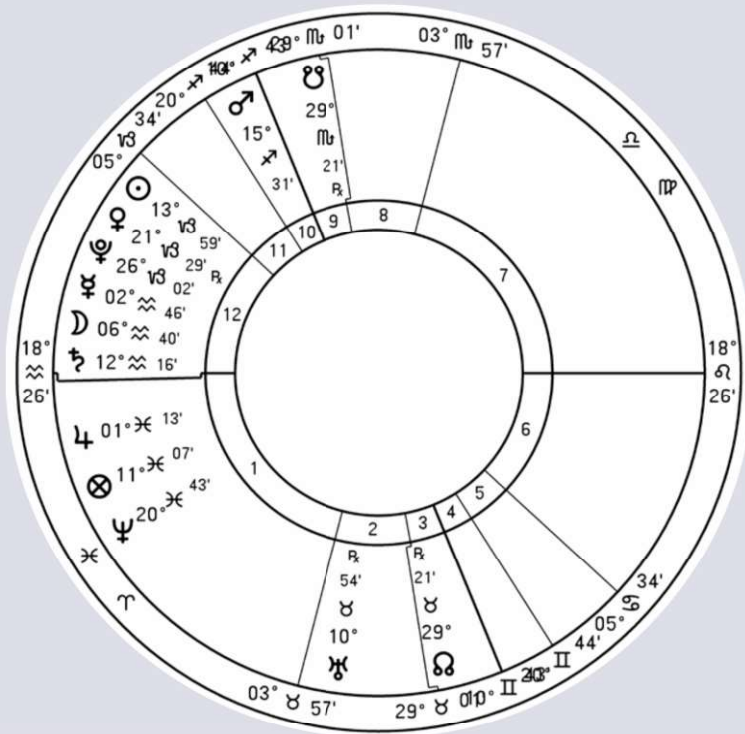
Purple = prime vertical. Dark green = equator. Meridian = light blue. Red = ecliptic. Dark blue = horizon. Latitude lines are drawn from the poles of the prime vertical.





Campanus Houses

Purple = prime vertical. Dark green = equator. Meridian = light blue. Red = ecliptic. Dark blue = horizon. Latitude lines are drawn from the poles of the prime vertical.



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the local horizon and prime vertical, making its symbolism highly personal. It is no wonder that Dane Rudhyar used this as his preferred house system for his humanistic brand of astrology!

TIME-BASED SYSTEMS

The **Alcabitius** House System measures the *time* it takes for the point of the Ascendant to rise to the midheaven, and simply trisects the result to mathematically determine the house cusps. It applies the same procedure from the point of the IC to the Ascendant. This was the preferred house system of Bonatti.

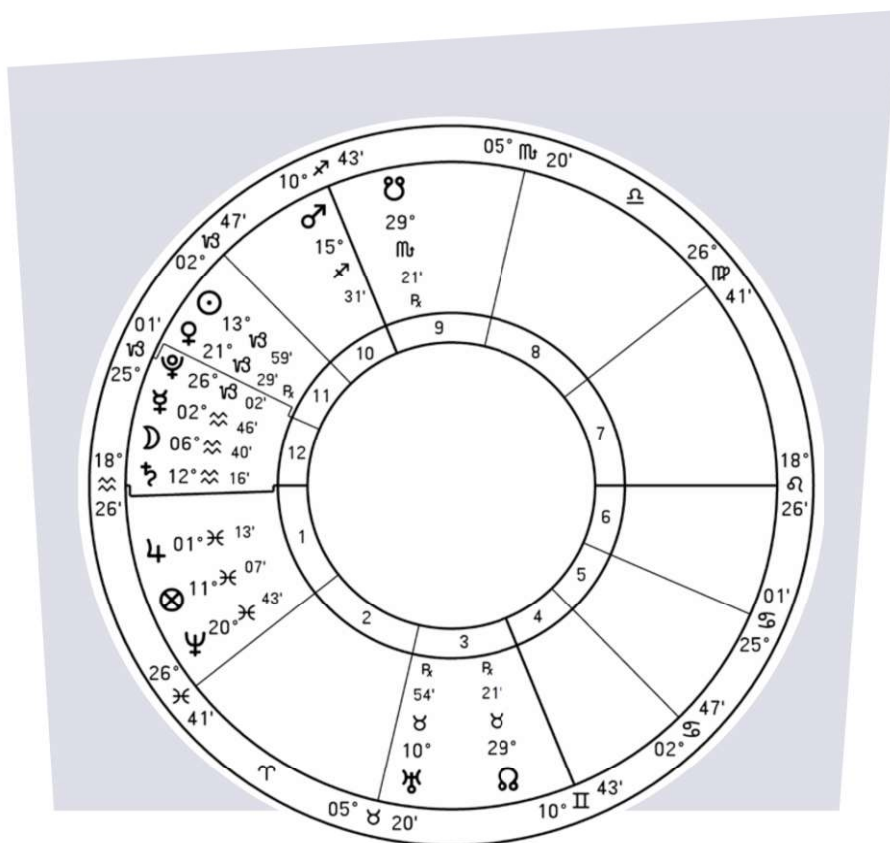
Alcabitius is similar to the idea of the Porphyry system, except that it trisects *time* rather than the ecliptic. Through its use of the rotation of the Earth itself as the basis of determining the house cusps, this system is tied more closely to the Earth and what goes on within it, as well as the humanistic symbolism of the Ascendant rising from the point of the horizon through time.

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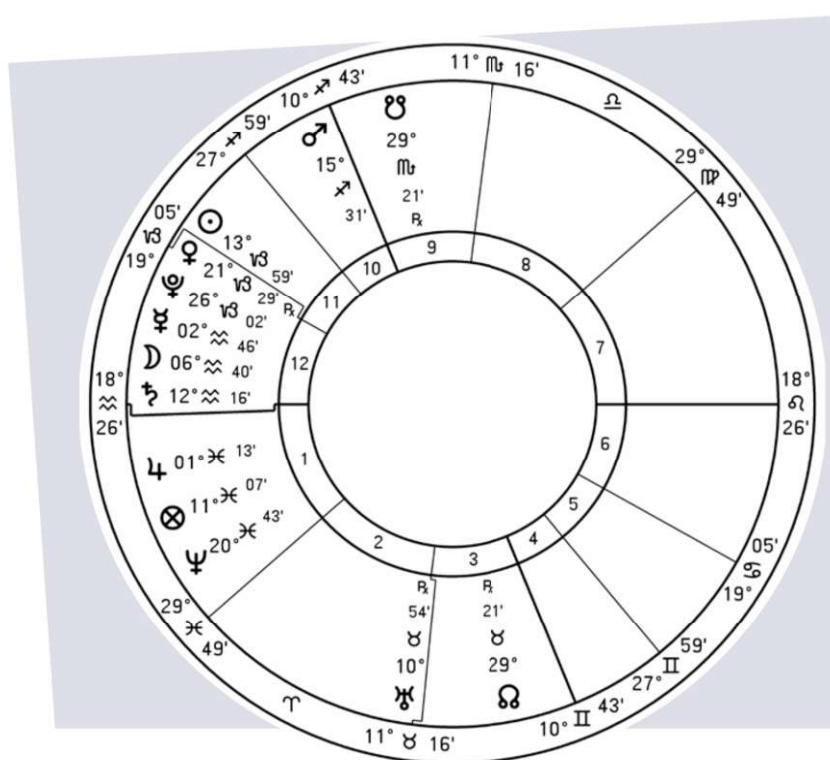
Koch Houses are calculated in a similar manner to Alcabitius, except that we go backward in time.

Koch Houses are calculated in a similar manner to Alcabitius, except that we go backward in time in Koch, rather than forward, as in Alcabitius. The time it takes for the point of the M.C. to reach the Ascendant is measured backward in time and then trisected. The times are then projected onto the ecliptic. Symbolically speaking there is more of an emphasis on the M.C. in this system, which would highlight the 4th/10th House axis.

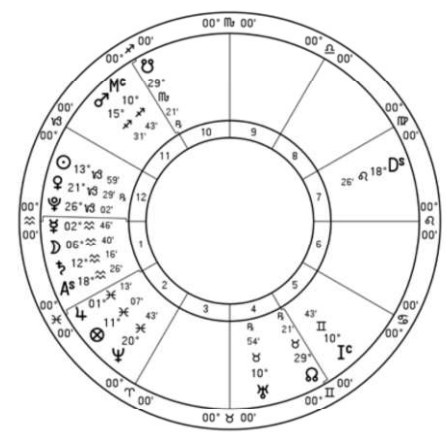
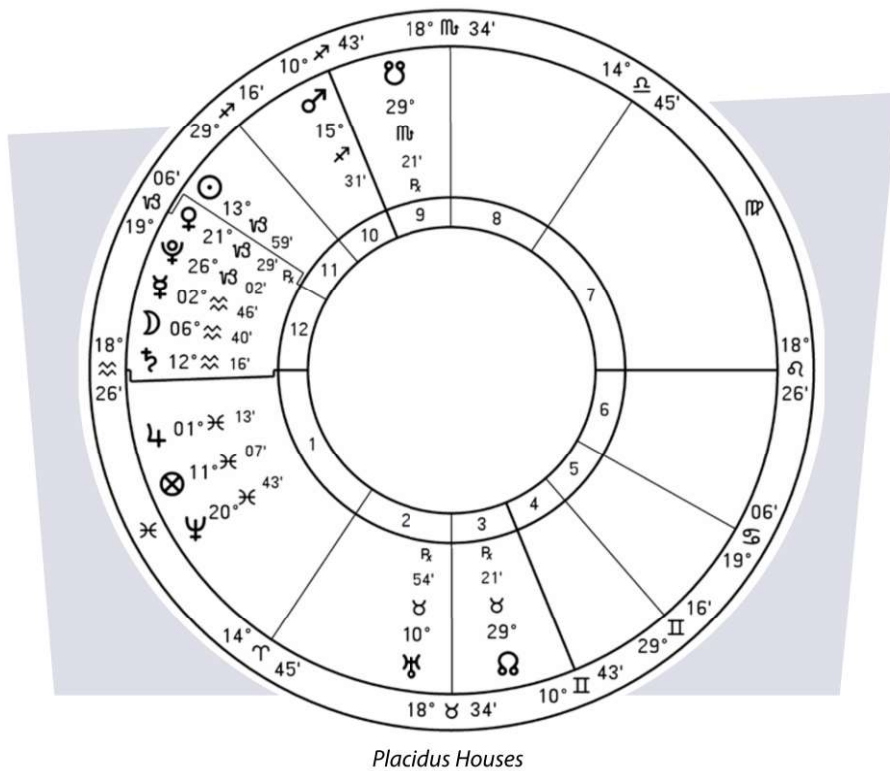
Placidus builds on Alcabitius, going further by taking into consideration the varying times of right ascension (diurnal motion) for the signs of the zodiac: some



Alcabitius Houses



Koch Houses



Symbolically the Placidus system is closest to the reality of being on the planet Earth.

signs take longer than others to rise over the Ascendant.

Placidus considers this in the calculation of houses and is an elegant refinement of the Alcabitus system. Symbolically this system is closest to the reality of being on the planet Earth. Because of this and its heightened use of the Ascendant, it is a factor in what makes Placidus work so well in connection with psychological and evolutionary natal astrology.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning, all of these house systems work in practice. The way to think of them is not that one is "right," and another "wrong," or that one is inherently better than another. A more effective approach might be to make use of more than one house system when analyzing a natal chart. One could liken this to a photographer who takes many photos of the same subject from different perspectives.

As we have seen, each house system is based on a different set of celestial circles, which render varying house cusps

and sometimes put planets in different houses. Let's say that this happens when using WSH and Placidus on the same natal chart. Consider this example (see charts at upper right):

The planets are in different houses, oh dear! What do we do?!?! Which chart do we use? Which one is "right"?

The answer to this question is that both charts are right; the only thing that is happening is that we are seeing the same native from different perspectives! It is not a question of choosing between one or the other. Both should be interpreted.

When looking at a natal chart, I have found it is best to try putting the information in more than one house system to see if any of the planets change houses. When they do, I look at the changes with interest and delineate both.

I've found that working simultaneously with two house systems often yields interesting information. For example, if I'm using WSH and Placidus, when I see a planet move from one house to another, I interpret both and see what resonates with the client. With clients who are past their second Saturn return, I have found that both usually resonate, representing different aspects or periods of their lives. For younger clients, this is not always the case, because it may be that the symbolism represented in one of the charts has not happened yet.

Which house system you use might depend on what you're trying to do. For prediction, you might use one system, for dealing with a client going through emotional turmoil, another.

For horary, it does not make sense to use more than one house division system because horary doesn't work like that. In horary, you can use any house system you want, as long as you tell the universe which one you intend to use before casting the chart... And the universe will respond accordingly! In natal astrology, changing house systems gives you alternative views on different areas of the native's life.

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In conclusion, I put forth that all the symbolism I've mentioned represents ideas to get the conversation going among present-day astrologers. Rather than arguing in favor of one house system over another, it makes sense to focus your research on which house system is best for specific astrological techniques, based on the celestial circles that come into play.

In this article, I have barely touched the surface of what the symbolism of each celestial circle might represent. These topics need further reflection and meditation

by our community. I look forward to further discussion and research into this area by my fellow astrologers.

Grateful acknowledgement in preparing this article to the following resources, recommended for further reading:

Bruce Scofield - *Astrological Chart Calculations* (2018) One Reed Publications
Graham Bates - *The Astronomy of Houses* (2014) Urania Trust
Martin Gansten - *Primary Directions* (2009) The Wessex Astrologer
Deborah Houlding - *The Houses* (2006) The Wessex Astrologer

And to Bernadette Brady, whose workshop on house division sparked my interest in this fascinating subject.

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