

In Defence of Alcabitius Houses

Seven Reasons an Astrologer Might Prefer Alcabitius to Placidus

Rhys Chatham – Céret, France – 31 August 2026

My colleague David Bustamante Segovia has recently been extolling the virtues of the Placidus house system, going so far as to argue that it is the only valid house system for determining intermediate house cusps.

Segovia's paper is entitled *Objective Resolution of Prevalent Geometric and Astronomical Misconceptions in Celestial Partitioning*; you can download a copy of it [here](#).

It is written in highly technical and at times unnecessarily elaborate language, which can obscure rather than clarify its central argument. Nevertheless, it rewards careful reading. Segovia clears up misunderstandings about how Placidus houses are calculated, and the illustrations he has created are absolutely stunning. Be sure to look at them: in this case, the saying that “a picture is worth a thousand words” is particularly apt.

For readers who have difficulty with its technical language, the paper's argument can be summarised as follows:

1. Every ecliptic degree has its own declination and therefore its own diurnal and nocturnal semi-arcs at a particular terrestrial latitude.
2. The Ascendant and MC are objective stages in that diurnal motion: the Ascendant degree is rising, while the MC degree is culminating.
3. Intermediate house cusps ought to be generated by the same principle. They should identify degrees that have completed one-third or two-thirds of their own semi-arcs.
4. Placidus calculates precisely those degrees.
5. Other systems do not. Alcabitius uses the semi-arcs of the Ascendant degree as a single temporal framework; Koch uses the semi-arcs of the MC degree; Regiomontanus divides the equator; Campanus divides the prime vertical, and so forth.
6. Therefore, according to the paper, those systems are not equally valid descriptions of the local sky. They are artificial projections or historical computational shortcuts that fail to reproduce the proportional position of every cusp degree within its own diurnal or nocturnal semi-arc.
7. Since Placidus alone preserves this “spatiotemporal fidelity,” the paper concludes that it alone produces physically valid intermediate cusps.

Where the *Objective Resolution* paper goes too far, in my view, is in arguing that primary motion, as represented by Placidian cusps, provides the only astronomically valid basis for house division. According to this position, other approaches, including other time-based systems such as Alcabitius and Koch, are artificial approximations rather than legitimate constructions. When I raised this objection to him recently, the author went so far as to compare abandoning Placidian geometry with allowing astrology to become an exercise in Tarot. While I personally have nothing against the Tarot, that is a conclusion I cannot accept.

The house system an astrologer chooses depends largely upon the kind of astrology being practised and what the astrologer wants the houses to describe. For example, many traditional astrologers who employ time-lord techniques such as annual profections or zodiacal releasing use ecliptic-based houses for topics, whether or not they also use a quadrant system to assess angularity and strength. Rather than reopen the familiar and rather wearying whole-sign versus quadrant-house debate, however, I began thinking about a narrower question: why might an astrologer who wants a time-based system prefer Alcabitius to Placidus?

One objection I've heard to Placidus is its intermediate cusps cannot be obtained through a simple direct calculation and therefore must be guessed.

As I explain under Reason 3, however, numerical iteration, the method used when a longitudinal value cannot be obtained directly, does not make the resulting cusps uncertain. It is a rigorous mathematical process that repeatedly refines an estimate until the required degree of precision is reached.

Another reason contemporary practitioners of medieval astrology might prefer Alcabitius is that it supplied the standard quadrant framework for much of the medieval tradition. However, once we set aside the argument that "it was what medieval astrologers used" and the outdated objection that Placidus cusps are merely guessed, I think there are valid reasons to choose Alcabitius over Placidus.

Before considering these reasons, we should identify the essential difference between the systems:

- Alcabitius uses one master clock: the motion of the Ascendant degree.

Its semi-diurnal arc from the eastern horizon to the MC is trisected to determine the Eleventh and Twelfth House cusps, while its semi-nocturnal arc from the IC to the eastern horizon is trisected to determine the Second and Third House cusps.

The remaining intermediate cusps are obtained by opposition, establishing a single temporal framework for all twelve houses.

- Placidus gives every intermediate cusp its own clock: each cusp degree must have completed the appropriate fraction of its own semi-arc.

This distinction suggests several reasons why an astrologer might prefer Alcabitius.

Reason 1: Alcabitius preserves the Ascendant as the organising principle

In Alcabitius, the Ascendant is not merely the First House cusp; it generates the temporal structure of the houses. The portions of the Ascendant degree's diurnal and nocturnal journeys between the horizon and meridian are divided into three equal temporal parts. Hour circles are drawn through the resulting trisection points, and their intersections with the ecliptic determine the intermediate house cusps.

This gives the system a beautiful conceptual unity: one nativity, one Ascendant, one local temporal framework.

Placidus is more refined in accounting for the individual semi-arcs of the intermediate degrees, but one could also say that it relinquishes this unity: the twelfth house cusp is determined by the semi-arc of one degree, the eleventh by another, and so on.

Some consider this a virtue. Others may regard the Alcabitian unity as the virtue.

Unlike Placidus, Alcabitius retains the original ascending degree as the single temporal measure governing the entire construction, making it a remarkably elegant and unified time-based house system.

Reason 2: Alcabitius treats the houses as divisions of the chart's quadrants

An astrologer may understand houses primarily as sectors between the four angles. From that viewpoint, it makes sense to:

1. establish the Ascendant, MC, Descendant and IC;
2. measure the temporal journeys of the Ascendant degree between those angular boundaries;
3. divide each of those temporal intervals into thirds;
4. draw hour circles through the trisection points; their intersections with the ecliptic determine the intermediate cusps.

Placidus approaches the matter differently. It asks which ecliptic degrees are presently at particular proportional stages of their own semi-arcs.

Both are time-based, but they conceptualise what a “house” is differently:

- Alcabitius emphasises the division of the nativity's angular quadrants.
- Placidus emphasises the individual diurnal phase of each potential cusp degree.

An astrologer who prefers to think of houses arising from the angles will find Alcabitius more intuitive.

Reason 3: The simplicity and transparency of Alcabitius are genuine virtues

Modern numerical iteration is not guesswork. The longitude of an intermediate Placidus cusp is an unknown variable in an implicit equation and cannot be isolated using a simple direct formula. It must therefore be found through numerical iteration: repeating the calculation, using each result as the starting point for the next, until it converges on a precise answer.

“Iterative” does not mean “inexact” because the iterative process eventually gives us precise values for unknown variables. Nonetheless, this process is somewhat obscure and difficult to follow.

On the other hand, the very directness and transparency in the calculation of Alcabitius remain a legitimate reason to prefer it. Its construction can be followed and checked without treating the process as a kind of black box, where we have little or no idea of what is going on within it. The time taken by the Ascendant degree to travel along its arc between the horizon and meridian is divided into equal stages. These stages are measured in sidereal time, and the resulting trisection points are projected onto the ecliptic by means of hour circles. The calculation is conceptually inspectable from start to finish.

That matters for teaching and for understanding what the calculation is doing. Simplicity does not make a system truer, but it should not be brushed aside as just a matter of convenience. An astrologer may reasonably prefer the method in which the link between the starting idea and the final result is clear for all to see.

So, I would refine the objection of astrologers who say Placidus is “guesswork” and say this:

The intermediate Placidus cusps are not “guesswork” in the sense of being numerically uncertain. They are found by solving an implicit equation, in which the required cusp longitude cannot be isolated through a simple direct calculation, rather than by dividing one established temporal framework.

That is a difference, though of course not an invalidation of Placidus.

Reason 4: Alcabitius has a different claim to diurnal symbolism

The *Objective Resolution* paper presents Placidus as though it alone honours primary motion. But Alcabitius is also firmly grounded in the Earth’s daily rotation. It traces the Ascendant degree’s diurnal and nocturnal passage through the quadrants bounded by the horizon and meridian, dividing those journeys into equal temporal stages. These intervals are measured in sidereal time, corresponding to arcs of right ascension on the celestial equator.

So an Alcabitian could say:

“I want a time-based system in which the Ascendant provides a single temporal framework for the houses, rather than one in which every intermediate cusp degree provides its own temporal measure.”

That is not an abandonment of astronomical time. It is just another way of formalising it.

Alcabitius was historically known as the “standard method” and remained in widespread use for centuries. Because it divides the Ascendant degree’s daily journey between the horizon and meridian, it is more than just an old historical curiosity: it offers a clear and unified way of thinking about diurnal house division.

Reason 5: It keeps us close to the technical world of medieval astrology

This point goes a little deeper than simply saying, “the medieval masters used it, so I use it.”

Since Alcabitius supplied the working framework for a substantial portion of medieval astrological practice, changing the house system may alter the application of techniques described within that framework. Planets near intermediate cusps may move into different houses; cusp rulers may change; and judgements about strength may come out differently.

So, using Alcabitius helps an astrologer reproduce not just the look of a medieval chart, but the working framework behind it.

It is similar to keeping a traditional set of bounds or a traditional way of calculating a lot when working from an older source. The parts of a tradition were not always developed separately, so changing one part can affect how the rest of the technique functions.

Reason 6: Alcabitius can offer a more restrained response to latitude

Placidus is exquisitely sensitive to the individual declinations of its cusp degrees. That produces the dramatic compression and expansion that the *Objective Resolution* paper regards as a faithful picture of the local sky.

But an astrologer may not want the intermediate houses to respond that dramatically. They may consider the four angles to be the primary local astronomical facts and prefer the houses to divide the quadrants according to a single temporal framework.

Choosing Alcabitius does not mean ignoring the local sky. Alcabitius remains responsive to terrestrial latitude, but it gives greater importance to the four angles and the single temporal framework established by the Ascendant than to the individual semi-arcs of the intermediate cusp degrees.

Reason 7: Alcabitius may simply produce better delineations within a particular practice

Finally, there is practice. If an astrologer repeatedly finds that Alcabitius house placement and cusp rulership clarify natal promise, horary questions or medieval predictive work more consistently, then that is a legitimate reason to use it.

It would not prove Alcabitius universally correct, any more than successful Placidus delineations would prove Placidus universally correct. But experience derived from practice is precisely the kind of evidence that should inform an astrologer's choice.

Conclusion

When choosing between the time-based systems of Alcabitius and Placidus, the decision is not simply a choice between a primitive approximation and sophisticated accuracy. Placidus is the more elaborate model, and it completely fulfils the aim of determining every intermediate cusp from the semi-arc of its own degree. But Alcabitius begins from a different aim. It does not follow that the Alcabitian aim is defective.

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Alcabitius is not merely a crude forerunner waiting for Placidus to correct it. It expresses a coherent alternative idea: the Ascendant establishes the temporal architecture of the entire nativity.

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Suggested reading:

The Michelsen Book of Tables (Starcrafts Publishing, 2009)

The Michelsen Book of Tables combines two earlier works, The American Book of Tables and The Koch Book of Tables, in a single volume containing tables for both the Placidus and Koch house systems. It also includes “How to Cast a Natal Horoscope,” by Robert Hand and Joshua Brackett, which provides step-by-step instructions and clear explanations of how the Koch and Placidus systems are derived. The book enables readers to calculate charts by hand with a minimum of technical jargon.

Links to short articles on house division by Rhys Chatham:

<https://rhysastrology.fr/how-to-calculate-alcabitius-houses/>

<https://rhysastrology.fr/how-to-calculate-koch-houses/>

<https://rhysastrology.fr/understanding-the-placidus-house-system-in-astrology/>