

Theōn hemerai: Astrology, the Planetary Week, and the Cult of the Seven Planets in the Graeco-Roman World

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Abstract

This paper looks at the concurrent spread of astrology and the seven-day planetary week in the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean from the last century BCE through Late Antiquity. During this period astrology became increasingly pervasive in all aspects of life and among members of all levels of society. Astrology was not only a system of divination claiming to predict the future by observing the stars: it implied a religious conception of the world, its starting point being the faith in celestial divinities that were thought to exert an influence on the world. The Sun, the Moon, the planets, and other astral phenomena were understood as divine powers affecting the life and fate of human beings. In the planetary week, each day was named after one of the seven non-fixed heavenly bodies of the universe, as it was known in antiquity: Saturn (Saturday), Sun (Sunday), Moon (Monday), Mars (Tuesday), Mercury (Wednesday), Jupiter (Thursday), and Venus (Friday). In turn, the five planets and the two luminaries (the Sun and the Moon) had been named after Greco-Roman gods and goddesses and were themselves regarded as celestial deities, following the near eastern tradition that identified the heavenly bodies with specific divinities. This chapter argues that the growing familiarity, from early imperial times onwards, with astrological concepts and practices along with the use of the seven-day planetary week as a means for measuring time, contributed to the diffusion of astral beliefs and the cult of the seven planets as week deities in the Graeco-Roman world during the imperial and late antique periods.

1. Astrology mania and the emergence of the seven-day planetary week in the early Principate

Astrology, the ancient divinatory art of Babylonian origin based on the observation of heavenly bodies, became increasingly popular in the Graeco-Roman world from ca. 200 BCE. In Hellenistic times the astrological discipline was much developed by the Greeks of Ptolemaic Egypt, whence it expanded both to the rest of the Greek-speaking world and to the

western Mediterranean. The Babylonian astrological tradition had a strong religious component, whereby the Sun, the Moon, and the planets were regarded as the stars of the principal divinities of mythology. The Greeks of Alexandria inherited Babylonian astrology and developed it further by contributing Hellenistic philosophy, mythology, astronomy, and mathematics to create what is known as Hellenistic or Classical astrology. The process of ‘rationalisation’ of Babylonian astral divination through Greek science resulted in an osmotic interplay between the science of celestial phenomena and astral divination: the ancient Greeks and the Romans did not make a clear distinction between astronomy and astrology.¹ Hellenistic astrology was characterised by the application of a set of complex mathematical notions to celestial phenomena with the aim of explaining the movements of the stars and planets and their influence on mankind and on terrestrial events. Indeed, in addition to ἀστρολόγοι/*astrologi* and χαλδαῖοι/*Chaldei*, the astrologers were also known as μαθηματικοί/*mathematici*.²

The diffusion of astrology in the Graeco-Roman world was facilitated by a few factors: to begin with, the support provided by philosophical doctrines such as Stoicism, Pythagoreanism, and Platonism.³ These asserted the idea of a relationship between stars and human soul, and the notion of cosmic *sympathy* between the different parts of the universe, which causes terrestrial events to be dependent upon the movements of celestial bodies. Moreover, the philosophers mostly agreed on the divine nature of the stars. These philosophical doctrines lent astrology an additional sense of sacredness and helped popularise astrological concepts in the Graeco-Roman world.

In addition to the support provided by philosophy, equally important in promoting the spread of astrology was the place of the stars and their myths in Hellenistic poetry, which in turn had a prominent role in an aristocratic education.⁴ Aratus’ *Phenomena*, an early 3rd-century BCE didactic poem describing the constellations and weather signs, became hugely popular in Graeco-Roman antiquity; in the West, a number of authors including Cicero, Ovid, and Germanicus translated Aratus’ *Phenomena* into Latin.⁵ Ample evidence of how astrology and astral lore had become prevalent among the upper classes of the early empire is provided

¹ Cumont 1929: 153; Hübner 1983: 2; 1988: 9; Barton 1994b: 5; Beck 2007: 3–8; Pérez Jiménez 2014: 49–50; von Stuckrad 2016: 114.

² Pérez Jiménez 2014a: 95.

³ Cumont 1912a: 68–70, 81–89; 1912b: 513–520, 524–525, 529–531; Liebeschuetz 1979: 125; Hübner 1983: 3, 17; Barton 1994a: 37–38; Barton 1994b: 34–37, 62, 102–113; Bakhouche 2002: 115–122. On the relationship between astrology and Greek philosophy, Pfeiffer 1916 remains authoritative. See also von Stuckrad 2007: 78–93.

⁴ Barton 1994a: 38, 48–50; Green 2014: 68; von Stuckrad 2016: 127.

⁵ Hübner 1983: 3; Gee 2013: 5–7. The *Phenomena* was composed ca. 276 BCE.

by Augustan literature – suffice to think of Manilius’ *Astronomica*, another didactic poem about celestial phenomena, which was permeated with sidereal fatalism.⁶

Moreover, this new form of divination was closely linked to and spread together with a variety of so-called oriental cults,⁷ such as the cult of Cybele from Asia Minor, that of the Egyptian deities Isis and Serapis, and the mystery cult of Mithras, who was originally an Indo-Iranian god. These were influenced by astrology as well as by Greek philosophy. Mithraism, in particular, was one of the several cults centred on the Sun in antiquity, and its cult ideology was imbued with astrological theory.⁸ As has been effectively described by Franz Cumont, “the triumph of [the so-called] oriental religions was simultaneously the triumph of astral religion”.⁹

In the Graeco-Roman world, as had been the case in Mesopotamia, astrology had a religious connotation,¹⁰ and spread both on the elite level – among intellectuals and politicians – and on the popular level – among the masses. A scientific, highbrow form of astrology coexisted with a simplified, popular version, which is often labelled *Laienastrologie* in the German-speaking literature and *astrologie vulgarisée* in French.¹¹ Not everyone who believed in the influence of the stars could possibly understand the whole system. By the late 1st century BCE, astrology had become pervasive in all aspects of life and among members of all levels of Graeco-Roman society, from the Emperor and his entourage to the humblest inhabitant of the Empire, especially in its western half. It is within such *astrologised* context,¹² in early imperial Italy, that we find the earliest traces of the use of the planetary week of astrological origin.¹³ Each day of this week was named after one of the seven planets or non-fixed heavenly bodies of the universe, as it was known in antiquity: Saturn (Saturday), Sun (Sunday), Moon (Monday), Mars (Tuesday), Mercury (Wednesday), Jupiter (Thursday),

⁶ See especially Green 2014.

⁷ Cumont 1912a: 89–94; 1912b: 525; 1929 (esp. 151–179); Hübner 1983: 3.

⁸ Beck 2006.

⁹ Cumont 1912a: 94.

¹⁰ Cumont 1929: 158–168. See also Festugière 1944: 10. Hübner 1983: 1 defines astrology as “a religious doctrine of antiquity”.

¹¹ Eriksson 1956; Hübner 1983; Pietri 1984: 68. See also Nilsson 1933: 166–173, who refers to this phenomenon as *Populärastrologie*. Although astrology is nowadays counted among the so-called pseudo-sciences, Hellenistic astrology was a highly technical discipline based on Greek physics, mathematics, and astronomy and was regarded as a science, as observed earlier. Suffice it to think of the *Tetrabiblos*, a work on astrology written in the first half of the second century CE by the great scientist, mathematician, and astronomer Ptolemy, which remained the most authoritative text on astrology throughout antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance.

¹² See Liebeschuetz 1979: 122: “In the reign of Augustus, belief in astrology was widespread.”

¹³ The evidence for the use of the planetary week first appears in the second half of the 1st century BCE in the form of a few allusions in Roman literary sources, and becomes increasingly abundant during the first centuries of our era, when we can rely on literary, epigraphic, and documentary sources, as well as material evidence. See Bultrighini 2018: 61–65 (with previous bibliography); Bultrighini and Stern Forthcoming.

and Venus (Friday). In turn, the five planets proper and the two luminaries (the Sun and the Moon) had been named after the Graeco-Roman gods and goddesses Kronos/Saturnus, Helios/Sol, Selene/Luna, Ares/Mars, Hermes/Mercurius, Zeus/Jupiter, and Aphrodite/Venus. Indeed, following the Babylonian astrological tradition that associated each of the planets with a specific divinity, around the 4th century BCE the Greeks named the seven planets after gods and goddesses of their own pantheon.¹⁴

The generally accepted explanation for the order followed by the seven gods in the planetary week is based on the so-called doctrine of the chronocratories, supposedly of Alexandrian origin, according to which the planets were considered as *chronokratores*, i.e. time-lords, in view of their being rulers of years, months, days, and hours.¹⁵ The week was mapped out in one hundred and sixty-eight hours; the seven planets, by order of distance from the Earth (farthest to nearest) – Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and Moon –¹⁶ were assigned serially to the twenty-four hours of the day, and then to the one hundred and sixty-eight hours of the week, the planet assigned to the first hour of each day becoming the ruler of that particular day.¹⁷ Therefore each planet was assigned both to specific hours of the day and to a whole day.¹⁸ The resulting sequence runs from the day of Saturn (Saturday) to the day of Venus (Friday): unlike the Jewish and Christian hebdomadal cycles, whose first day is Sunday, the planetary week began on Saturday.

Although the earliest and, in fact, the vast majority of the evidence for the planetary week surfaced in the Italian peninsula, it has been generally assumed that this type of week was created in the Greek East, with most scholars agreeing on Hellenistic Egypt as its place of origin.¹⁹ According to this theory, the planetary week was devised in the Alexandrian milieu,

¹⁴ At first, the Greeks used to designate each planet as “the star of” the relevant deity (e.g. ὁ ἀστὴρ τοῦ Κρόνου, “the star of Kronos”); by the late 1st century BCE the planets began to be called simply by the name of the gods and goddesses with whom they had been identified. This process of linguistic assimilation is an indication of an ideological and religious identification (Cumont 1935a and 1935b). On the various names given by the Greeks to the planets, see also Gundel 1950: 2025–2033; Pérez Jiménez 2002: 249–251.

¹⁵ Hübner 1983: 14; Barton 1994a: 47.

¹⁶ This is the so-called Chaldean order, of which no traces are found before the 2nd century BCE (Boll 1912: 2567; Cumont 1912a: 165; 1912b: 518; Zerubavel 1989: 14).

¹⁷ Vett. Val. 1.10; Dio Cass. 37.18–9.

¹⁸ In the Chronograph of 354 (on which see Stern 1953, Salzman 1990, Divjak and Wischmeyer 2014) each of the twenty-four hours of the day (twelve daylight hours and twelve nocturnal hours) is ruled by one of the seven planetary deities and is assigned a specific character: good (*bona*), bad (*noxia*), or indifferent or neutral (*communis*). A fragmentary marble slab from the area of Potenza Picena, ancient *Potentia* (CIL IX 5808; *Suppl.It.* XXIII 2007, 171; 1st/2nd century CE) preserves Tuesday’s (*dies Martis*) twelve night-time hours (expressed as I to XII): next to each hour is the name of its presiding planet and its character. For instance, the entry for the seventh hour reads as follows: *VII Sol(is) c(ommunis)*. See Kubitschek 1928: 35–36; Heilen 2020: 244–246; Bultrighini and Stern Forthcoming.

¹⁹ Maass 1902: 267–272; Boll 1912: 2555–2573, esp. 2571–3; Kubitschek 1928: 32–34; Gundel 1950: 2143–2144; Zerubavel 1985: 12–19; Salzman 2004: 188. See Dio Cass. 37.18: “The custom of referring the days to the

where the Greeks developed further Babylonian astrology to create Hellenistic astrology, which eventually expanded throughout the ancient Mediterranean. However, the idea that the planetary week originated in Ptolemaic Egypt is not provable, as there are no traces of this concept in any source of the Hellenistic period. In fact, there is no evidence of a planetary week in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Hellenistic world, or anywhere further east, before the second century CE; and even then, it remained a limited phenomenon. The evidence therefore suggests that the tradition could only have originated in Rome or Italy.²⁰

Irrespective of exactly where and when the planetary week was invented, for our present purposes it is important to note that this type of week seemingly first spread as a sheer astrological concept: arguably, it was the belief in the power and control of the planets over hours and days that led to its adoption.²¹ Due to their role as *chronokratores*, time-lords, and because they were regarded as having the power to influence earthly affairs and the life and fate of human beings, the planets were not merely *named* after gods and goddesses of the Graeco-Roman pantheon but came to be entirely *assimilated* to those deities.²² One of the earliest pieces of evidence for the planetary week corroborates the idea that the seven planets had been identified with specific divinities of Greek mythology. In a graffito from Pompeii, whose date is thus secured by the *terminus ante quem* of the Vesuvius eruption of 79 CE,²³ the names of the planetary deities are listed in the genitive and in the planetary week order under the heading Θεῶν ἡμέρας, “days of the gods”: Κρόνου, “(day) of Kronos” (Saturday), Ἡλίου, “(day) of Helios” (Sunday), Σελήνης, “(day) of Selene” (Monday), Ἄρεως, “(day) of Ares” (Tuesday), Ἑρμοῦ, “(day) of Hermes” (Wednesday), Διός, “(day) of Zeus” (Thursday), and Ἀφροδείτης, “(day) of Aphrodite” (Friday). This graffito demonstrates not only that the

seven stars called planets was instituted by the Egyptians” (τὸ δὲ δὴ ἐς τοὺς ἀστέρας τοὺς ἑπτὰ τοὺς πλάνητας ὀνομασμένους τὰς ἡμέρας ἀνακεῖσθαι κατέστη μὲν ὑπ’Αἰγυπτίων. Transl. Cary 1914: 129). Colson (1926: 53–55, 59) is sceptical about the possibility to pinpoint the place of origin of the planetary week; Rüpke (1995: 456; 2011: 162) places it more generically in the Greek East.

²⁰ Bultrighini and Stern Forthcoming. See also Bultrighini 2018: 62–65.

²¹ Rüpke 2011: 162–163; Bultrighini 2018: 64.

²² See esp. Cumont 1929: 161–162, 167–168; 1935a: 35–36. In his *De natura deorum*, Cicero criticises the identification of stars and planets with the gods and goddesses of Graeco-Roman mythology; e.g. 3.63: *Quod cum facitis, illud profecto confitemini, longe aliter se rem habere atque hominum opinio sit; eos enim qui di appellantur rerum naturas esse non figuras deorum*, “and in so doing, you admit right away that the facts are very different from the popular belief, because the beings which are called gods are really natural forces and not personal deities at all” (transl. McGregor 1972: 219). According to Cicero it is necessary to distinguish between the *physica ratio*, “scientific theories” regarding the stars, and the *impiae fabulae*, “immoral fables” developed by poets and supported by the Stoics (Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.63–64). See also the introductory remarks to a 1st-century CE horoscope (Neugebauer/Van Hoesen 1959, no. 137c), which refers to the planets as the “seven gods” (ἑπτὰ θεοί). Much later, chapter 21 of the so-called Second Apocalypse of John (probably belonging to the late 4th century CE) refers to the Greeks (as in, the ‘pagans’) as “those who were believers in idols, in the Sun and the stars” (καὶ οἵτινες ἐπίστευον εἰς τὰ εἰδῶλα καὶ εἰς τὸν ἥλιον καὶ εἰς τοὺς ἀστέρας).

²³ *CIL* IV 5202. Kubitschek (1928: 37) assigns it to ca. 50 CE. The graffito is scratched on a wall decorated with Third Style paintings; next to the inscription is a depiction of a herm of Herakles.

planetary week cycle must have been widely known in southern Italy in the mid-1st century CE, but also that the seven planets, which had been named after Graeco-Roman deities, were themselves regarded as gods and goddesses; and, as such, they were thought to *own* the seven days over which they presided.²⁴

2. *Laienastronomie* and astral beliefs in the Roman Empire

The religious connotation inherent to the use of this system of measuring time – the implied belief in the seven planets as celestial divinities exerting a powerful influence on mankind – characterised the planetary week since its emergence and continued to coexist with the time-reckoning function until Later Antiquity. A substantial portion of the evidence of the use of the planetary week originates from the western half of the Roman Empire, is provided by Greek and Latin epitaphs, and belongs to the late imperial period. Quite interestingly, several of these epitaphs can be identified as belonging to a Christian milieu. In general terms, it is not rare for Greek and Latin epitaphs to provide the length of life of the deceased in years, months, days – occasionally even in hours.²⁵ Such detail in describing the length of somebody’s life can be seen as a way to summarise a destiny.²⁶ Furthermore, this implies that the inhabitants of the Roman Empire (or at least a certain proportion thereof) knew the exact date²⁷ and occasionally even the hour of birth of their family members; in this respect, it should be emphasised that the hour of birth was the key piece of information required to cast a horoscope and therefore had a special significance in astrology. The time of birth is indeed

²⁴ As an example, the 4th-century astrologer Paul of Alexandria certainly considered the planets as deities. Chapter 20 of his *Elementa apotelesmatica* or *Introductory Matters* is titled “Concerning knowing to which of the gods each day belongs” (Περὶ τοῦ γινῶναι ἐκάστην ἡμέραν, τίνας τῶν θεῶν ἐστίν). On Paul of Alexandria, see Perez Jimenez 2011, with previous literature.

²⁵ The habit of specifying how many hours the deceased lived is a reflection of astrological beliefs (Cumont 1929: 154). For the limited number of Latin epitaphs mentioning as short periods of time as fractions of an hour, see Luciani 2009.

²⁶ Abry 1989: 91.

²⁷ The celebration of an individual’s birthday (*dies natalis*) was a common practice in the Roman world (e.g. Ovid, *Tr.* 3.13.13–18; Mart. 10.24. See Schmidt 1908; Argetsinger 1992). From the time of Augustus, births were officially registered throughout the Empire: birth certificates (written on scrolls or wooden tablets) were stored in public archives as well as in the individual’s home (Apul. *Apol.* 89). For examples of birth certificates, see, e.g., Schulz 1942–1943. While there seems to be no Greek parallel for the tradition of annual celebration of personal birthdays, commemorative rites held on the birthday of the deceased are attested in Greece from ca. 300 BCE (Diog. Laert. 10.18); also, religious associations feasted on the occasion of birthdays of members and benefactors (Vlassopoulos 2015: 263). All this implies knowledge of the date of birth on the part of *common* people in ancient Greece. See also (assuming that Wilhelm’s restoration is correct), the funerary epigram *SEG* 28.357 (= *IG* II² 13132; from Piraeus, 1st century CE), l. 5: [κατὰ δὲ γενέθλιον] ἡμᾶρ ἐμοὶ θανάτου τέλος ἦλθεν, “the fate of death came to me on my birthday”.

the basis of genethliology or natal astrology,²⁸ the most widespread form of Hellenistic astrology, which was practiced throughout the Roman Empire. According to genethliology, an individual's fate and character depend on and can be predicted from their horoscope, namely the position of the planets in the Zodiac at the moment of birth.²⁹ By way of illustration, the importance of the hour of birth is highlighted by the Stoic philosopher Seneca, who affirms: "fate guides us, and it was settled at the first hour of birth what length of time remains for each."³⁰ Even though it can be assumed that the inhabitants of the empire generally knew their date of birth,³¹ this is not a common element of Greek and Latin epitaphs. Neither is the date of death –although it is less rare than the date of birth– or at least not a date of death described in such detail as to include the day of the planetary week and the hour when the passing occurred. This information was unlikely to serve the purpose of setting a date in the collective time. I argue that the presence of these specific elements in Greek and Latin epitaphs is indicative of the acceptance of a popular form of astrology on the part of those who had these inscriptions carved: the belief in the heavenly bodies as divine powers determining the life and fate of mankind. As for the agents who may have transmitted these astral beliefs, astrologers certainly played a key role in the spread of the idea that the stars possessed supernatural powers; after all, astrologers "typically held divine understandings of celestial bodies and their relevance to human affairs".³² Moreover, as explained above, philosophers and certain religious currents may also have had a part in this transmission.

Let us now consider a few examples of epitaphs dating to the late imperial period, which attest to the use of the planetary week and suggest a belief in sidereal deities and in a form of *Laienastrologie*. The funerary epigram of a child named Agathon, probably from Catania, was inscribed in Greek on a marble plaque, possibly in the 4th century CE.³³ In the first four

²⁸ Barton 1994b: 86–113; Beck 2007: 9–10, 70–71, and *passim*; Pérez Jiménez 2014: 50, 69.

²⁹ See, e.g., the funerary epigram of a girl, in which the deceased herself alludes to the fact that her parents had consulted an astrologer at the moment of her birth: *cum mihi bis quinos annos mea fata dedissent, undecimum me non licuit perducere annum*, "although my fates had given me twice five years, I was not allowed to complete an eleventh" (*CIL* VI 7898. Rome, second half of the 1st century CE. See, most recently, Phillips 2018, with full bibliography on the inscription at 96, note 2).

³⁰ Sen. *Prov.* 5.7 (transl. Basore 1963: 37). See also Manilius, *Astron.* 4.16: *Nascentes morimur, finisque ab origine pendet*, "At birth our death is sealed, and our end is consequent upon our beginning." (transl. Goold 1977, 223). See Cumont 1949: 303–320; Abry 1989: 95–96. This verse also appears in the epitaphs *CIL* II 4426 (= *CIL* II² 14.1809; from *Tarraco*, second half of the 1st cent. CE) and *CIL* XI 3273 (= *CLE* 1489.3; from *Sutrium*, undated). Both inscriptions, however, are regarded by some scholars as forgeries (Hernández Pérez 2001: 89 note 369; Alföldy 2007: 338–339 no. 14; Antolini 2009: 867 note 27).

³¹ See note 27. *Contra* Degrassi 1967: 222–223, who assumes that most people would not know their exact date of birth, nor that of their relatives.

³² Wendt 2015: 185.

³³ *IG* XIV 525; Agnello 1953: no. 106; *IGChrVO* 1042; *IMus. Catania* 174 (with further references). The inscribed plaque is now in the Museo Civico Castello Ursino in Catania (Room 6, no. 39, inv.no. 231).

lines Agathon’s mother addresses Thanatos/Death and laments the infant’s premature passing; lines 5–6 provide his date of birth: Ϡ ἐγενήθη ὁ κύρις Ἀγάθων πρ(ὸ) ιε´ Ϡ/καλανδῶν Νοενβρίων ἡμέρᾱ Κρό[νου], “the *kyrios* Agathon was born on the 15th day before the calends of November, on the day of Kronos (Saturday)”; lines 7–8 specify that Agathon lived 10 months and died on the 10th day before the calends of September, on the day of Helios (Sunday): ἔζη(σεν) μῆ(νας) · ι´ · ἀπέθανε πρ(ὸ) · ι´ · καλανδῶν Σεπτενβρ[ίων]/ἡμέρᾱ Ἡλίου. The epitaph closes with an invocation to Saint Agatha, the principal martyr of ancient Katane/Catania.³⁴ The two christograms on line 5 along with the reference to Saint Agatha, after whom the boy was presumably named, leave little doubt on the Christian identity of those who set up the funerary monument. In this respect, one could perhaps conjecture that the fact that Agathon died on a Sunday was deemed noteworthy in view of it being the most important day of the Christian week – the day of Christ’s resurrection. Yet at the same time a series of elements in Agathon’s epitaph show that his parents were deeply influenced by astral beliefs:³⁵ the inclusion of his date of birth,³⁶ which comprises the specification that he was born on a Saturday, that is, on the astrologically unfavourable day of Kronos/Saturn;³⁷ the length of their child’s life, expressed in months; and his date of death, again comprising the day of the planetary week.

³⁴ The meaning of the last line of Agathon’s epitaph has been debated. See Korhonen 2004: 251 for a summary of the various proposals. Korhonen (2004: 252) does not exclude the possibility that *kyria Agathe* might in fact refer to Agathon’s mother, rather than Saint Agatha. I am following the interpretation offered by Feissel 1981: 496–497.

³⁵ On the coexistence of astrological and Christian beliefs as attested by early Christian epigraphic and archaeological sources, see Hegedus 2007: 195–199.

³⁶ Both Feissel 1981: 495 and Korhonen 2004: 251 stress that the date of birth is rarely included in Greek epitaphs. Feissel also notes that the date of birth appears more frequently in Latin epitaphs, though there appear to be no occurrences earlier than the 4th century CE.

³⁷ See, e.g., Lucan 1.651–652 (Saturn as *stella nocens*); Plutarch, *de Iside et Osiride* 370 C 8; Ptolemy, *Tetrab.* 1.5; Firmicus, *Math.* 3, *passim*; Servius, *Georg.* 1, 335; *Aen.* 4, 610. Bouché-Leclercq 1899: 93–101; Cumont 1899: 120; 1912b: 531; Janssens 1981: 282–284; Pietri 1984: 68; Barton 1994b: 96, 117, 129, 125; Beck 2007: 76–79. Although the planets’ influence was thought to vary according to their position, in general terms Mars and Saturn were regarded as noxious, Jupiter and Venus as auspicious, and the Sun, the Moon and Mercury as neutral or ambivalent. Further epitaphs in which the deceased’s birth occurred on the day of Saturn include *ICUR* I 479 (= *ILCV* 3650; 368 CE) which commemorates an eighteen-year-old boy who was born and died on the same ominous day of the week. Another example is the epitaph of a three-year-old girl who was named after the planetary deity ruling the day of the week on which she was born: Saturn sealed Saturnina’s fate from her birth and until her death, which again occurred on Saturn’s inauspicious day (*CIL* X 2933; from Cuma; undated). The most astral-influenced case is perhaps that of Simplicius, who apparently was born and passed away on the very same day; the date is pinned down very precisely by the mention of the consular year, the hour (of birth), the month-date, the day of the week (Saturday), as well as the Moon’s day and longitude: “the boy named Simplicius was born when the *divus* Iovianus Augustus and Varronianus were consuls, at the 4th hour of the night. He lived (only) on the 8th day before the ides of May, a Saturday (day of Saturn), when the Moon was in its 20th day and on the sign of Capricorn.” (*ICUR* VI 15587; 364 CE).

Another interesting case is that of a late 3rd-century CE epitaph from Marseille, ancient Massalia in Gallia Narbonensis.³⁸ It is inscribed in Greek on a limestone *cippus* with upper and lower mouldings and decorated with semi relief images of an *ascia*, a *patera*, and a level.³⁹ The epitaph opens with the dedication to the gods of the underworld, Θ(εοῖς) Κ(αταχθονίους), the Greek version of the *Dis Manibus* formula. It then informs that the tomb belongs to Aurelius Diokleides, who lived seventeen years and fifteen days (Αὐρηλίου Διοκλείδου, ὅστις ἔζησεν ἕτεα ιζ, ἡμερῶν δεκαπέντε); his parents Aurelius Diokles and Aurelia Tertia took care of the setting up of the funerary monument (Αὐρ(ήλιος) Διοκλῆς καὶ Αὐρηλία Τερτία γονεῖς/χάριν μνήμης ἔθηκαν). The last five lines tell us that the boy “was born on the day of Venus, as was Herakles, (and) on the day of Aphrodite he was carried away by the gods called the Pythians” (γεγ<έ>νηται εἰς τὸ Οὐέ/νερις, ὅπου Ἡρακλῆς, ἡμέρα Ἀφροδείτης ἡρ/πάγη ὑπὸ θεῶν καλου/μένων Πυθίων). Without dwelling on the intriguing references to Herakles⁴⁰ and the Pythians,⁴¹ a series of features show that Aurelius Diokleides’ parents were imbued in astral fatalism and believers of a popular form of astrology: we first find the length of their son’s life expressed in years and days; we then learn that the boy was born and passed away on the same day of the week, Friday: the Latin form in Greek script Οὐένερις corresponds to the Greek Ἀφροδείτης; therefore both formulae refer to Friday, the day of Aphrodite/Venus.⁴² Aurelius Diokleides’ parents – two Romanised Greeks –⁴³ apparently thought that it was their child’s fate to be born and to die on a Friday, the day of the week ruled by the planetary goddess Aphrodite or Venus: according to ancient astrological principles, people were subject to the stars from the cradle to the grave, and the movements of the planets were thought to determine the fate of the person who was entrusted to them at the moment of birth. Indeed, in a number of epitaphs that include the day of the planetary week on which the deceased’s birth and death occurred, those who set up the funerary monument seemingly wished to stress that the person was born and died on the same

³⁸ *IG XIV 2436; IG France 23* (= *SEG 54.979.1*). The inscription was found in 1799 in the ruins of the abbey of Saint-Victor and is now in the Marseille History Museum (inv.no. 83.7.50).

³⁹ On the decoration see Benoit 1966, esp. 85–86. The ample literature on the *ascia* symbol has been most recently discussed by Arrigoni Bertini 2006: 7–46, and Mayer-Olivé 2013: 21–25. The latter offers a new interpretation of these representations (see esp. 24–40).

⁴⁰ According to various sources Herakles was born on the 4th of April, which was Aphrodite’s month; in a similar manner, Aurelius was born on a Friday, Aphrodite’s day (presumably also on the 4th of April) and he equally died on a Friday (probably, again, in April). Benoit 1966: 85–86; Decourt 2004: 33.

⁴¹ Decourt 2004: 33–34 identifies the Pythians with Apollo *Moiragetes* and Zeus *Moiragetes*.

⁴² Chaniotis 2007 assumes that “since Οὐένερις is simply the Latin form of Ἀφροδείτης, a period should be placed after Ἀφροδείτης.” This would imply that Aurelius Diokleides was born on a Friday, the day of the week being expressed both in Greek and in Latin (in Greek script), but no temporal indication would be given in relation to his death. It is however unlikely that a sepulchral inscription comprised the date of birth of the deceased but did not include any reference to their date of death.

⁴³ Benoit 1966: 85; Lomas 2004: 485–486.

day of the week, thus denoting an astrological or astral lore attitude – the idea that the planetary deity ruling that specific day determined the deceased’s fate.⁴⁴

This appears to be the case with the epitaph of a girl from Rome, which has been attributed to the late 2nd century CE on palaeographical grounds.⁴⁵ The first line, which revealed the girl’s name, is lost. The last three letters of her name appear on line 2 (ll. 2–4): *νία θυγατ[ρὶ]/γλυκυτάτη/μνείας χάριν*, “[To]nia, sweetest daughter, in remembrance.” The following five lines state: “I am the statue of Helios; and indeed I was born on the day of Helios, and on the day of Helios my time came” (*ἄγαλμά εἰμι Ἥλίου· καὶ γὰρ Ἥλιου/ἡμέρα ἐγενήθη/καὶ Ἥλιου ἡμέρα/κρίσις μου γέγονεν*). The inscription is likely to be referring to an actual statue of the planetary god Helios, which presumably adorned the funerary monument.⁴⁶ As in the case of Aurelius Diokleides’ sepulchral inscription, the epitaph of this unidentified girl from Rome suggests that her parents regarded as particularly significant the fact that she was born and passed away on the same day of the planetary week – in this case Sunday, the day ruled by Helios/Sol; accordingly, they probably emphasised this coincidence not only in her epitaph, where the name of the god is repeated three times, but also in her funerary monument, by decorating it with a statue of the planetary deity that marked the girl’s life from the cradle to the grave.⁴⁷

The epitaphs discussed above belong to small children and young girls and boys – Agathon was a ten-month-old toddler, Aurelius Diokleides was seventeen years old, and the female owner of the sepulchral inscription from Rome was presumably a little girl or an unmarried young woman at most.⁴⁸ The fact that these children’s parents could afford to have their epitaphs inscribed on marble *stelai* is a sign that these must have been relatively well-off families. In any case, regardless of their social status, these are premature deaths: the

⁴⁴ See, e.g., *CIL* V 1634 (from Aquileia; undated), the epitaph of a girl who “was born on the day of Venus, at the 11th hour, and passed away on the same day (of the week), at the 2nd hour, on the day of Venus (*nata est die Veneris/ora XI eo die defuncta est [ora secu]nda die Veneris*). See also *DACL* VII, 749.

⁴⁵ *IG* XIV 2184; Forbes 1956: 250 (= *SEG* 17.458); *IGUR* II 1061. The marble slab was found near Porta S. Sebastiano and is now in the Lapidary Gallery of the Vatican Museums, on Wall 23 (no. 22, inv.no. 7631), which gathers “the pagan inscriptions in Greek” of the collection. While in *IG* the epitaph is regarded as *possibly* Christian, Moretti (*IGUR*) considered it pagan.

⁴⁶ According to Forbes (1956: 250), the statue depicted Osiris as the Egyptian Sun god and chthonic power to whom the dead were assimilated.

⁴⁷ Similarly, the life of the veteran Vitalinus Felix from ancient Lugdunum was consistently marked by a specific day of the planetary week: “[...] he was born on the day of Mars, he took military service on the day of Mars, he was discharged on the day of Mars, he died on the day of Mars”, *natus est d[ie] / Martis die Martis prob[a]tus die Martis missione[m] / percepit die Martis def[u]nctus est* (*CIL* XIII 1906; *ILS* 7531; *CAG* 69.2, 666, no. 4. Various dated from the mid-2nd to the early 4th century CE).

⁴⁸ Moreover, *ICUR* I 479 (see note 37) commemorates an eighteen-year-old boy; *CIL* X 2933 (see note 37) is the epitaph of a three-year-old girl; *ICUR* VI 15587 (see note 37) belongs to a baby who probably lived for less than a day; and Aurelia Eustocia (*CIL* V 1634, see note 44) was not yet three years old when she passed away.

reference to the date of birth, including the day of the week and the hour, as well as the date of death, again specified by the day of the planetary week, can be regarded as allusions to the belief in a popular form of astrology and to the idea that the untimely death of these children was caused by a noxious influence from the stars, which were considered as divine powers.⁴⁹

3. Worshipping the seven planetary deities of the week

Another way of looking at how the knowledge of popular astrological notions and of the planetary week as a time-reckoning system informed religious attitudes and practices in the Graeco-Roman world consists in considering the evidence for the actual worship of the seven planetary deities of the week. A remarkable and indeed quite unique piece of evidence for the cult of the Seven is an inscribed altar from Ankara (Turkey), the site of ancient Ankyra in the region of Galatia.⁵⁰ This is a square altar of pale limestone, with a deep basin cut into its top surface. Each face of the altar displays an inscription accompanied by an image in semi relief: a face shows the names of the gods Hermes and Zeus in the genitive, along with the representation of a thunderbolt (Fig. 1); a face bears the names of Selene and Ares in the genitive plus a rounded item (Fig. 2); a face shows Aphrodite's name, again in the genitive, and the image of a Nike holding a wreath (Fig. 3); the inscription of the fourth face is lost, but I have recently restored it as providing the names of Kronos and Helios in the genitive; this face shows a compass-drawn, multi-petalled image, circumscribed by a circle (Fig. 4). I have elsewhere argued that this altar was dedicated to the seven gods and goddesses of the planetary week.⁵¹ The order in which the names of the deities are inscribed on the four vertical faces of the altar corresponds to the order of the seven days in the planetary week (Kronos, Helios, Selene, Ares, Hermes, Zeus, Aphrodite): since seven names cannot be distributed evenly onto the four vertical faces of a square altar, Aphrodite's name necessarily ended up appearing on its own on one face of the altar. The semi relief images that appear underneath the inscriptions match and complement the inscribed names: the multi-petalled image circumscribed by a circle below the inscription [Κρόνου Ἡλίου] symbolises Helios, the Sun; the thunderbolt under Ἑρμοῦ Διός relates to Zeus; the Nike holding a wreath under Ἀφροδείτη[ς] refers to Aphrodite;⁵² and the rounded object under Σελήνης Ἄρεως represents

⁴⁹ On premature death and astrology, see Cumont 1949: 303–342. On other types of noxious powers believed to be responsible for untimely deaths in antiquity, see Graf 2007.

⁵⁰ French 2003: 134, no. 33 (= *SEG* 53.1439); *I.Ancyra* 196 (cf. *SEG* 62.1092); Bultrighini 2017: 187–189.

⁵¹ Bultrighini 2017: 187–189.

⁵² See Verg. *ecl.* 10.69: *omnia vincit Amor*.

a crescent and is therefore associated with Selene, the Moon. The altar was assigned to the 3rd century CE on the basis of both the letterforms and the style of the reliefs. This dating fits well with what is known about the diffusion of the seven-day planetary week in the Graeco-Roman world, which apparently enjoyed great popularity during the later imperial period.⁵³ The altar demonstrates that the planetary deities were not only regarded as the rulers of each of the seven days of the week but were also cult recipients: the deep basin cut in its top part was designed to receive votive offerings, thus showing that the altar was employed within the context of a cult activity: for performing sacrifices, saying prayers, or for attesting the fulfillment of a vow. One could imagine that the worshippers may have made offerings or prayed to the presiding planet of each day of the week in turn.⁵⁴

A literary reference to altars dedicated to the seven planetary deities of the week, which appears to imply the performance of cult activities for these divinities in the Greek East during the later imperial period and thus substantiates the evidence provided by the altar from Ankara, is in Nonnos of Panopolis' *Dionysiaca*. When listing the human forces that joined Dionysus in his war against the Indians, Nonnos mentions the contingent from Euboea and asserts that “seven captains armed this host, but all of one temper for war: on a blazing altar they propitiated the stars of the Zodiac path and committed their campaign to the planets of equal number”.⁵⁵ Arguably, the seven commanders who ruled the Euboean battalions are here described as sacrificing to the seven planetary deities of the week. These verses provide a literary counterpart to the inscribed altar from Ankara as well as further backing to the assumption that the rulers of the seven days of the planetary week had been deified and received a collective cult. Nonnos probably refers to a religious practice that existed sometime in the not-too-distant pagan past, but it cannot be excluded that sacrifices and other rituals were still performed for the seven planetary deities – perhaps on the day that was dedicated to each of them in turn – in Egypt, where Nonnos was born and lived, as late as the early 5th century CE, when the *Dionysiaca* is thought to have been written.⁵⁶

⁵³ Bultrighini 2017: 189; 2018: 62–65; Bultrighini and Stern Forthcoming.

⁵⁴ Prayers to the seven planets are attested from the 4th century CE: Firm. Mat. *Math.* 1.10.14; *CCAG* VIII.2, 154–158 (cf. VII, 4). See Cumont 1899: 119–120; 1912a: 163–164; 1912b: 530; 1921: 46; 1929: 167–168; Hübner 1988: 11. For the persistence of the custom of addressing prayers to the planets up to the Middle Ages, see Kieckhefer 1990: 133. On Mithraic monuments, the planets are occasionally represented as seven flaming altars; these depictions might refer to the worship of the seven planetary deities and specifically to sacrifices performed in their honour (Gundel 1973: 614).

⁵⁵ *Dion.* 13.167–170: ἐπτά μὲν ἡγεμόνες στρατὸν ὤπλισαν, ἀλλ' ἓνα πάντες / θυμὸν ἔχον κατ' ἄρηα· καὶ ἀστέρας αἴθοπι βωμῶ / Ζωδιακῆς ναετῆρας ἐμειλίζαντο κελεύθου, / δῆριν ἰσηρίθμοισιν ἐπιτρέψαντες ἀλήταις (transl. Rouse 1940). The seven planets are placed on “the Zodiac path” for poetic licence (Vian 1995: 224).

⁵⁶ Maass 1902: 148. For further examples of Nonnos' knowledge of ancient cults and rites that survived into late antique Egypt, see Gigli Piccardi 1998. The impact of astrology on Nonnos' poem has been persuasively

Comparable evidence (both textual and material) can be found in the Roman West. Six inscribed greyish limestone statue bases were discovered in the 18th century at Vervò, in the modern region of Trentino in northern Italy.⁵⁷ All but one of the bases were subsequently lost; yet we know that each base was inscribed in Latin with the name of one of the seven planetary deities in the dative: *Saturno, Lunae, Marti, Mercur(io), Iovi, Veneri*. Originally the bases must have been seven, the missing one being inscribed with the name of Sol, the Sun, in the dative.⁵⁸ Each of these seven bases presumably supported a statue of the corresponding planetary week deity. On the basis of the palaeography of the only surviving base, the one inscribed with the name of Mars,⁵⁹ they were attributed to not earlier than the 2nd century CE. The names of the sidereal deities are in the dative, which indicates that these are votive inscriptions and that each base was dedicated to each of the seven planetary deities. Although these votives do not necessarily imply the presence of a sanctuary or temple specifically dedicated to these deities, nonetheless they suggest that a cult of the seven planetary gods and goddesses of the week was practiced in northern Italy around the 2nd century of our era.⁶⁰

Traces of a monument or shrine dedicated to the seven planetary deities of the week were found at Henchir-Kasbat in Tunisia, the ancient Thuburbo Maius in Africa Proconsularis. Each of the names of the seven planetary divinities is inscribed in the genitive case within a *tabula ansata* and the Seven are arranged in the planetary week order on a limestone cornice: *Saturni Solis Lunae [Mar]tis Mercuri Iovis [Ve]neris*.⁶¹ Below each name is represented the equivalent planetary deity, in semi relief, in the shape of a bust with their typical attributes (Fig. 5). The reliefs are partially damaged but it is still possible to discern that just as in a number of further artefacts, mosaics, paintings, and architectural fragments bearing depictions of the planetary deities of the week which have been found throughout the Roman Empire, the Seven are here represented in the shape of the Graeco-Roman gods and goddesses after whom they were named and with whom they were identified:⁶² the religious personalities of the gods

demonstrated by Stegemann 1930. For the pervasiveness of astrology and astral cults in late antique Egypt, see Pérez Jiménez 2011.

⁵⁷ *CIL* V 5051–5056; Alföldy 1984: 143, nos. 262–267; *Suppl.It.* VI 1990, 195–96 (with further references).

⁵⁸ According to Alföldy (1984: 143), the base dedicated to Sol was probably lost at the moment of the discovery of the bases.

⁵⁹ *CIL* V 5052. The stone is now in the courtyard of Castel Bragher in the vicinity of Vervò.

⁶⁰ See Maass 1902: 139. Cf. Cumont 1899: 119 no. 1, 269, who assumed that the statue bases from Vervò were associated to the cult of Mithras. See, similarly, Ianovitz 1972: 92–93. The possibility should not be ruled out that the cult of the seven planets was practiced in conjunction with the mystery cult of Mithras.

⁶¹ *AE* 1925.38; Merlin 1944: no. 710; Benzina ben Abdallah 1986: 132, no. 346. The cornice is in the Bardo National Museum in Tunis (inv.no. 3516).

⁶² On visual representations of the seven planets as week deities, see de Witte 1877–1879; Haug 1890; Maass 1902; Duval 1953; Gundel 1950; 1973.

and goddesses were transferred to their stars.⁶³ Although in votive inscriptions the name of the recipient deity appears more frequently in the dative, it can also be in the genitive, as already seen in the case of the inscribed altar from Ankara: in both Greek and Latin inscriptions the genitive can be used to signify that the deity has become the owner of the object or monument that was offered to them. It is plausible to assume that the inscribed cornice from Thuburbo Maius was originally part of a small shrine or monument dedicated to the seven deities of the planetary week. No date has thus far been attributed to the inscribed architectural fragment; in view of the time frame of the emergence and diffusion of the planetary week in the Graeco-Roman world, the cornice may be broadly ascribed to between the late 2nd and the early 5th century CE.

Another intriguing (albeit rather late) allusion to the seven planetary deities of the week as recipients of a collective cult in the Roman West can be found in the poem known as *Laudes Veronensis Civitatis* or *Veronae Rythmica Descriptio*, which was apparently composed by a monk in the final years of the 8th century CE.⁶⁴ Among the Roman antiquities still visible in Verona at the time, the poem enumerates, in addition to beautifully paved market and streets and “the labyrinth” (i.e. the Roman amphitheatre), “shrines and temples built for the deities Luna, Mars, Minerva, Jupiter and Venus, and Saturn and Sol, this last deity shining with outstanding brightness”.⁶⁵ In all probability, the seven gods and goddesses mentioned here are the planetary deities of the week: Minerva is most likely an error for Mercury, and the order in which the deities’ names are listed is that of the planetary week, although the sequence starts with Monday (the day of Selene/Luna) instead of Saturday (the day of Kronos/Saturn).⁶⁶ It is of course highly unlikely that in the imperial or late antique period Verona housed seven temples, one for each of the deities of the planetary week; also, there is no way to determine whether a proper temple dedicated to the seven as a group ever existed either. However, on the basis of the parallels of the cornice from Thuburbo Maius, the statue bases from Vervò, and the evidence from the eastern Mediterranean examined above, it is conceivable that Verona may have featured a monument or shrine dedicated to the seven deities of the planetary week, which perhaps enclosed an altar or statues of these gods and goddesses.⁶⁷

⁶³ Pérez Jiménez 2002: 249.

⁶⁴ Dümmler 1881.

⁶⁵ *Fana et templa costructa ad deorum nomina Lunis, Martis et Minervis, Iovis atque Veneris, et Saturni sive Solis, qui prefulget omnibus* (Dümmler 1881: 120). The translation is mine.

⁶⁶ Maass 1902: 139–140.

⁶⁷ This supposed monument, or perhaps just the bases, may have still been visible in the 8th century CE, or known to the monk who composed the *Laudes* through some older source (Maass 1902: 139–140).

That during the Roman imperial period and in Late Antiquity the seven planetary deities of the week were worshipped in the Greek East as well as in the Roman West is further suggested by the frequent mention of prayers to the planets as divinities in the literary sources, especially in Christian apologetic writings.⁶⁸ As an example, the Christian poet Commodian, who flourished between the late 3rd and the 4th century CE in Roman Africa and was originally a pagan, criticises astrological practices and astral beliefs in his *Instructiones*. On more than one occasion, Commodian refers to the habit of addressing prayers to the five planets and the two luminaries, the Sun and the Moon:⁶⁹ “Concerning the Sun and Moon you are in error, although they exert a direct action on us; in that you, as I formerly did, think that you must pray to them”.⁷⁰ In the *Constitution of the Apostles*, a late 4th-century CE set of regulations compiled in Syria (probably Antioch),⁷¹ it is most severely forbidden for Christians to pray to the Sun, the Moon, and the planets, or to swear by them: “Nor do the legislators give us only prohibitions concerning idols, but also warn us concerning the luminaries, not to swear by them, nor to serve them. For they say: ‘Lest, when thou seest the Sun, and the Moon, and the stars, thou shouldest be seduced to worship them.’ [...] For the stars and the luminaries were given to men to shine upon them, but not for worship. [...] Consider, beloved, how many things the Lord declares against idolaters, and the worshippers of the Sun and Moon. Wherefore it is the duty of a man of God, as he is a Christian, not to swear by the Sun, or by the Moon, or by the stars; nor by the heaven, nor by the earth, by any of the elements, whether small or great.”⁷²

In fact, as early as the first half of the 1st century CE, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria was already reproaching the pagans for worshipping the planets and the luminaries: “For some have deified the four elements, earth, water, air and fire, others the Sun, Moon, planets and fixed stars, others again the heaven by itself, others the whole world.”⁷³

⁶⁸ On late antique prayers to the seven planets see note 54. On Christian attitudes towards astrology, see von Stuckrad 2000; Hegedus 2007; Pérez Jiménez 2011.

⁶⁹ See esp. 1.7 and 1.8, as well as 1.6. See Poinssotte 2009: 7–9, 134–147.

⁷⁰ Commod. 1.8.1–2: *De sole et luna, licet sint presentanea nobis / erratis: quod ego prius, putatis oranda.* (transl. after Poinssotte 2009: 8).

⁷¹ Metzger 1985–1987: vol. 1, 54–56.

⁷² Const. Apostol. 5.12.1–5: Οὐ μόνον δὲ περὶ εἰδώλων ἀπαγορεύουσιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ φωστήρων νομοθετοῦντες παραινῶσιν μῆτε ὀμνύειν ταῦτα μῆτε μὴν λατρεύειν αὐτοῖς· φασὶ γάρ· «Μὴ ἰδὼν τὸν ἥλιον καὶ τὴν σελήνην καὶ τοὺς ἀστέρας πλανηθεὶς προσκυνήσῃς αὐτοῖς.» [...] Τὰ γὰρ ἄστρα καὶ οἱ φωστῆρες εἰς φαῦσιν ἀνθρώποις, ἀλλ’ οὐκ εἰς προσκύνησιν ἐδόθησαν. [...] Ὅρατε, ἀγαπητοί, ὅσα κατὰ τῶν εἰδωλολατρῶν καὶ τῶν σεβομένων ἥλιον καὶ σελήνην ἀποφαίνεται ὁ Κύριος. Διὸ χρὴ τὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ ἄνθρωπον ὡς Χριστιανὸν μῆτε ἥλιον ὀμνῆναι μῆτε σελήνην μῆτε ἄστρα, μῆτε μὴν οὐρανὸν ἢ γῆν ἢ τι τῶν στοιχείων μικρὸν ἢ μέγα (transl. Christian Classics Ethereal Library: <http://www.ccel.org>, last accessed on 2.10.2018). See also Barton 1994b: 78.

⁷³ Phil. *De dec.* 53: ἐκτεθειώκασιν γὰρ οἱ μὲν τὰς τέσσαρας ἀρχάς, γῆν καὶ ὕδωρ καὶ ἀέρα καὶ πῦρ, οἱ δ’ ἥλιον καὶ σελήνην καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους πλανήτας καὶ ἀπλανεὶς ἀστέρας, οἱ δὲ μόνον τὸν οὐρανόν, οἱ δὲ τὸν σύμπαντα κόσμον (transl. Colson 1968: 33). See also *De dec.* 66.

Less than two centuries later, the Christian polemic against astral religion, opposing the idea that the Sun, the Moon, and the planets were gods and goddesses, is evident in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, particularly in his *Protrepticus* or *Exhortation to the Greeks*. Clement condemns the worship of the seven planets, which the pagans considered as deities: “Some, it is true, starting from this point, go astray – I do not know how – and worship not God, but his handiwork, the Sun, the Moon, and the host of stars besides, absurdly supposing these to be gods, though they are but instruments for measuring time.”⁷⁴ The characterisation of the planets as “instruments for measuring time”, derived by Clement from the Old Testament (*Gen.* 1.14), is a vivid allusion to the essential role of the celestial bodies in time reckoning and calendar construction; at the same time, I would argue that it is equally plausible to recognise in this expression a more specific reference to the seven planetary deities, each ruling one of the seven days of the planetary week, a time-measuring system that by the time of Clement had become widely known.

4. Conclusions

In this paper I have sought to demonstrate that from approximately the mid-1st century BCE and increasingly in the following centuries the knowledge of astrological notions and practices along with the habit of reckoning time by means of the seven-day planetary week led to the diffusion of astral fatalism and sidereal beliefs as well as to the worship of the seven planets as week deities throughout the Graeco-Roman world. These assumptions rest in the first instance on the premise that, as Franz Cumont put it, “astrology was not only a method of divination: it implied a religious conception of the world, and it was inseparably combined with Greek philosophy”.⁷⁵ The two luminaries and the five planets were not only understood as celestial powers exerting influence upon the life and fate of human beings, but came to be effectively identified with deities of Greek mythology.⁷⁶ In Roman imperial times, the belief in a popular form of astrology and in the seven planets as sidereal divinities controlling the destiny of mankind became pervasive among all strata of society, as can be gleaned, for instance, from Greek and Latin funerary inscriptions. Particularly telling are a number of epitaphs that comprise the date of birth as well as the date of death of the deceased, each date

⁷⁴ Cl. Al. *Protr.* 4.63.1: Πλανώμενοι γοῦν τινες ἐντεῦθεν οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως θεῖαν μὲν τέχνην, πλὴν ἀλλ' οὐ θεὸν προσκυνοῦσιν ἥλιόν τε καὶ σελήνην καὶ τὸν ἄλλον τῶν ἀστέρων χορόν, παραλόγως τούτους θεοὺς ὑπολαμβάνοντες, τὰ ὄργανα τοῦ χρόνου (transl. Butterworth 1979: 143). See also *Protr.* 4.63.4–5 and 6.67.2. The polemic against astral religion appears also in Clement's *Stromata* (5.28.6; 6.110.3; 111, 1–2).

⁷⁵ Cumont 1912a: 76.

⁷⁶ See Cumont 1935a: 35, “Les sept astres qui se meuvent perpétuellement dans le zodiaque, sont désormais des êtres où la divinité s'incorpore et ils s'identifient dès lors avec elle.”

including information such as the day of the planetary week and the hour when the event occurred. These details imply an attitude of sidereal fatalism and the belief in a popular form of astrology – or *Laienastronomie* –⁷⁷ on the part of those who had these epitaphs inscribed.⁷⁸ I have also argued that the widespread knowledge of astrological concepts jointly with the familiarity with the seven-day planetary week as a time-reckoning system played a major role in the emergence of a collective cult of the seven deities of the planetary week. The available evidence in support of a worship of these divinities as a group is strong but sparse. It nonetheless reveals that the Seven received a cult in both the Greek-speaking and the Latin-speaking world across the ancient Mediterranean during the Roman imperial period, as the practice of dividing the days of the year into cycles of seven days, each named after and ruled by one of the seven planets, became increasingly common. The evidence further suggests that the performance of prayers and ritual acts for the seven planetary gods and goddesses of the week persisted well into Late Antiquity.

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⁷⁷ See note 11, as well as Nilsson 1933: 168–169: “Denn für die Lebensanschauungen und die religiöse Vorstellungswelt der Masse hat diese populäre und äußerst verbreitete Form der Astrologie noch größere Bedeutung gehabt als die gelehrte Astrologie.”

⁷⁸ An example of funerary inscription expressing similar beliefs is the epitaph of Gaius Laberius Valens (*CIL* III 2722; *CIL* III 9729; *CLE* 1536. From Dalmatia. Late 1st/early 2nd century CE), in which the deceased himself ascribes the cause of his premature death to “his star”: *properavit aetas, voluit hoc astrum meum*.

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