

Muses of Heaven

- Brian Clark

Theogony is the earliest extant account of Greek cosmogony, which in essence is a prophetic vision recounted by its author Hesiod. The opening lines of the classic are devoted to the power of the Muses who 'breathed a sacred voice' into the shepherd and ordered him to 'sing the race of the blessed ones who live forever'.¹ The divinely inspired revelations concerning the birth of the Gods are motivated by the Muses, one of which is Urania, the 'heavenly' Muse and granddaughter of Ouranus, the 'starry heavens'. While the early Greeks did not literally observe the skyscape astrologically as their Egyptian and Babylonian counterparts did, nonetheless early references to the heavens are embedded in their myths.

Hesiod's earlier poem *Works and Days* reveals an appreciation of the starry sky; however references to particular star groups are codified like an almanac, such as the agricultural year being bookended by specific heliacal risings and settings. Scant fragments of his *Astronomy* give some details of constellations and their mythology; scholastic speculation is that some of these legends could have been used as guides for human affairs.² Still awakening from their Dark Age, the Greeks of this period imagined their myths against the canvas of the heavens and the mythic gods were their guides.³



A detail from Parnassus by Andrea Mantegna (Louvre) depicting the nine Muses

Analysis and clarification cannot be applied to myth in the same way that it can to history, as it is not a linear portrayal of times past; perhaps more akin to a soul history, a commentary on subjective experiences. The very nature of myth defies explanation as it shape shifts in the company of the storyteller and the listener. We may be listening to the same narrative, but each one hears the story from their experience and understanding. With each telling something new might be revealed. Relieved from having to believe in it or accept it as the truth, myth invites us to actively and imaginatively participate in its tale.

Myth is alive in every culture and in everybody. Yet as cultures develop mechanically and technologically so does their mythology. Scientism is itself a myth yet one whose dominance marginalises any other forms of mythmaking and with this myth, facts and theories replace gods and legends. When the principles of Hellenistic astrology began to emerge nearly six centuries after Hesiod's poems, philosophy had become the new myth that guided astrology's renewal.

Mythology legitimises the subjective world. As an Indian mythologist suggests, 'Myth is truth which is subjective, intuitive, cultural and grounded in faith.'⁴ Hence myths do not conform to rational analysis, measurements or theories, as myths are not literal accounts of outer events. Myth is not concerned with facts or literal causes but invites us to deepen our thinking and free ourselves from a two-dimensional reality of certitude and structure. In this way the right brain is exercised.

From this viewpoint of myth, let's return to the first Greek cosmological account given to Hesiod as a prophetic vision by the Muses. I would like to introduce you to one of *Theogony's* storytellers Urania, who you may already know and Asteria, both who are custodians of the starry heavens, whose mythic presence suggests that the template for measuring and reading the heavens was already part of the Greek soul.

Muse of the Starry Starry Night

The night sky is heartening; it always reappears, everlasting, timeless and we can trust that its lights will return; a cosmic timepiece that is always on the watch. Like a blanket carefully placed over a sleeping child, the night sky lays itself over the earth each night. But it is never really dark; the light is always there, the stars and planets are always locatable to navigate through the dark. These pinpoint of light shining through the tears in the heavenly canvas are admirable and a constant source of imagination and inspiration. Perhaps this is why I have heard so many of my astrological colleagues speak of their childhood fascination with the starry night sky. The starry heavens have been a comfort and an inspiration to countless souls; no wonder in the childhood of ancient Greece they named the muse Urania to watch over them. Through Urania the Greeks imagined an evocative sky.

Ancient Greeks personified a classical education through their nine muses who presided over realms of the imagination like poetry, song, dancing, music, comedy, tragedy, history and the study of the stars. Urania or *heavenly* was the youngest muse whose vehicle for inspired thought was the heavens; hence she becomes known as the muse of astronomy and astrology. In the mythological period distinctions were not yet delineated between science and divination, nor astronomy and astrology. The right and left hemispheres of the heavens had not yet been outlined.

As daughters of the Titaness Mnemosyne and Zeus, Urania and her sister Muses bridge the period between instinctual and ordered life. In Greek cosmogony Urania's mother Mnemosyne was the daughter of Uranus and Gaia, and the personification of Memory. Being a Titan and one of the earliest deities, Mnemosyne is the custodian of our memorabilia before the advent of the alphabet, writing, literacy, books, recordings and photos. She inhabits the pre-literate, right-brained world where memory is not cognitive but feeling, evocatively recounted, imaginatively pictured and inspirationally sung.

Memory does not just concern the past, but is the poignant beginning of musing. Embodying the voices of an oral culture that communicated through narratives, images, metaphors and odes, Mnemosyne reminds us that our soul story is revealed through dreams, oracles, feelings, responses, reveries, synchronicities or sudden images that dart into awareness. Embedded in the fragments of songs, in myths, fairy tales and patterns in the night sky linger ancient truths that evoke the intelligence associated with this goddess. Mnemosyne instinctually arouses memory through our reactions and responses. Memory embedded in the images of the starry night sky is constellated through her daughter Urania.

Being pre-Olympian Mnemosyne inhabits the mythological realm and characterises memory that could be thought of as 'feeling memory'. It is not cognitive, but memory stored in the body as our aches and pains, in the emotions as our reactions and responses and in our inner life as moods, dreams and perceptions. She personifies instinctual memory, not just a record of something that



Unlike her half-siblings Apollo, Hermes and Athena, who were the younger gods of the new order, Urania's destiny was not to be born an Olympian. She is from an earlier epoch before Zeus' rational world became triumphant and all encompassing and before the heavens became ordered and measured. Like the muse, astrology also has origins in an earlier world order where the participation with nature and the cosmos was not yet separated from human experience.

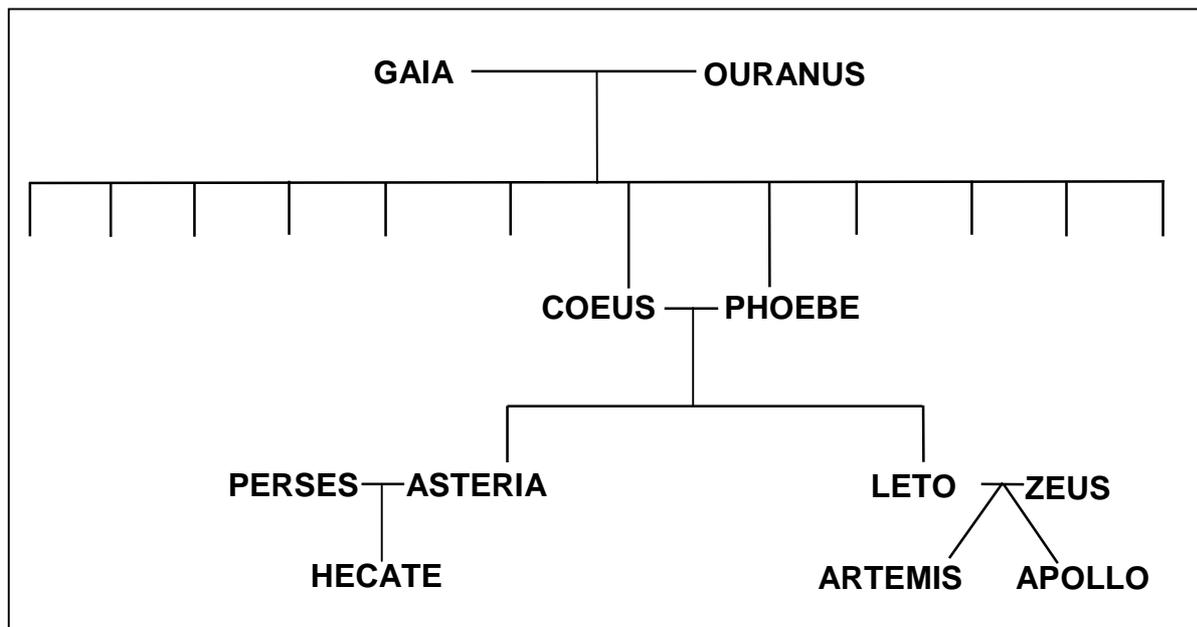
The sanctuaries of the Muses were museums where their inspirational and prophetic images could be appreciated. Urania's museum is the heavens. As custodian of the heavens, Urania uses the patterns of the stars, the movement of heavenly bodies and their interrelationships as the mnemonic device to give meaning to the cycles and events of life experienced on Earth. Through insight and order in the heavens, Urania engenders the felt sense of being an integral part of the cosmos. As astrology's muse, she personifies the soulful voice inspired through the order in the starry heavens.

Asteria: Reading the Stars

Another early goddess who serves as a mythic muse to astrology through divination by the stars is Asteria. Her name loosely means 'starry one' or 'of the stars' derived from the Greek *aster*.⁶ Unfortunately her mythological memoirs are sparse. In later myth she became associated with the 'reading' of the stars when her name often personified a seer involved in the art of divination.⁷ Named the 'starry one' we might imagine that she is one of the early personifications of reading the starry sky. And imagine we must, for her myth remains mysterious like the inexplicable instinct that draws us towards astrological handiwork. Fragments of Asteria's myth from early Greek literature are few; however, there is no doubt she belongs to the branch of divination, a strong limb on her family tree.

According to Hesiod in his *Theogony*, she was the daughter of the Titans, Coeus and Phoebe, both offspring of Gaia and Ouranus; therefore she inhabits the pre-literate period or mythological realm. Like Urania, Asteria inherits the starry heavens through her grandfather Ouranus, but also divination through her grandmother Gaia. This inheritance is passed on to Asteria's daughter Hecate, who will later become associated with magic and witchcraft.⁸ Her sister is Leto, mother of Apollo. Therefore Apollo is Asteria's nephew making Hecate and Apollo cousins.

Asteria's mother Phoebe was the third goddess to preside over the Delphic oracle. She was given the oracular realm in good will by her sister Themis, who inherited it from their mother Gaia, the first oracular deity. Then Phoebe gave her grandson Apollo, who had been named Phoebus for her, the oracle as a birthday gift to the young god. We know this mythic pattern through the tragedian Aeschylus who details the lineage of the oracle.⁹ Phoebe's name can be linked to the Greek words *phoibos*, 'bright' or 'radiant', *phoibaô* 'to purify' and *phoibazô* 'to give prophesy', all motifs of early associations with divination and healing.



When Zeus overthrew the older order of the Titans, the movement from mythical towards philosophical ways of thinking began. Under his administration, new myths and values emerged. As the new god of the heavens, Zeus began to dominate the mythological sphere through rational concepts. The mythological or right-brained sphere of the night was highly influenced by the spirit of the feminine which now was vulnerable to new values and beliefs. This shift from the mythological to the philosophical is clearly evident in the myth of Metis, the goddess of instinctual wisdom in the earlier period. Zeus devours Metis when she becomes pregnant with his child Athena, who then gestates in his belly and is eventually born through his head to become the Olympian goddess of wisdom. In astrological imagery Zeus/Jupiter rules Pisces, his mythological realm and Sagittarius, his philosophical domain. However in human development and culture, the philosophical sphere is becoming more valued, straining the inherent duality between these two ways of being.



From an Athenian red-figured amphora, ca 5th C BCE showing Asteria on Delos

Asteria was no exception to Zeus' domination of the feminine sphere. Desired by Zeus, Asteria threw herself into the Aegean, shape shifting into a quail to avoid his advances. Her eventual metamorphosis was into a small rocky island, named Ortygia which in ancient Greek means quail. This small rocky outcrop was also known as Asteria, but its most common name in the classical period was Delos,¹⁰ an island destined to become eminent. By classical times it was the celebrated birthplace of the god Apollo and his sister Artemis, as well as the political centre for the Delian league, an Athenian led coalition united against the Persians.

Asteria's sister Leto sought refuge on the small isle while she was pregnant with the god Apollo. Here she gave birth to the god of reason. Mother of Hecate, Asteria also was midwife to Apollo's birth. Leto, and her son Apollo, alongside Asteria and her daughter Hecate were descendants of an oracular and divinatory dynasty; therefore Apollo and Hecate inherit the divinatory tradition and become its keepers, but in different ways. With the ascension of Zeus and rational order, the divinatory function becomes separated into day and night. As the solar god, Apollo represents the day force when the oracular messages are delivered through a priest or priestess under the auspices of the god, while Hecate, as the lunar goddess, represents the night force where divinatory messages are revealed through dreams and practices such as augury and reading the stars. When astrology is practiced under the patronage of Apollo, oracular messages are interpreted and delineated; under Hecate's spell they are revealed through participation with the starry symbols of the night sky.

Under Zeus' administration, the illuminating rational nature of the day function dominates the subjective approach of the night force. Hence Apollo slays the Python that guards Delphi, rather than befriending it. Apollo aligns himself with 'right' systems like institutional religion and all that is reasonable and ordered. Apollo's divination is overlaid with rational constructs while Hecate's night-world is what is 'left': that which is unknown and ambiguous. In earlier times Asteria, mother to Hecate and aunt/nursemaid to Apollo, was the goddess associated with oracles and prophecies of night, including dreams and the reading of the stars. Astrology was not yet an art or science to the ancient Greeks, but an imaginative and divinatory participation with the images in the starry heavens.

Well before Zeus's reign, at creation's dawn, Nyx or night was one of the five primal deities to emerge from Chaos. Nyx gave birth to Aither and Hemere or brightness and day.¹¹ In this cosmological order, night exists before day and 'darkness' before 'brightness'. Astrology, as divination by the stars, is a revelation from the night world. Asteria reminds us of the right-hemisphere of the heavens, before the left hemisphere's measurements cleaved its distance from the imaginative reading of the stars.

As astrology became more allied with the day world of science, its imaginative participation with the night world faded. Ironically the starry heavens are only visible at night, yet are still as inspiring and revealing as they were before they became precisely measured and separated; the planets are still as divine and constant as when they were first witnessed. To participate with their revelations and be touched by their spirituality we do not look at them, but through them to the eternity of the cosmos and its mysteries. And this is the essence of the metaphor that moves astrologers no matter what their beliefs: the starry heavens are the eternal and constantly reassuring experience of a world far greater than our understanding; the starry heavens are beyond our intelligence and perfectly ordered in their own nature. Whenever we refer to the heavens we honour intelligence superior to our own and participate with the mystery and sacredness of the spirit that animates the cosmos. Astrology nurtures the pre-rational psyche where the divine can still be witnessed every night in the starry sky.

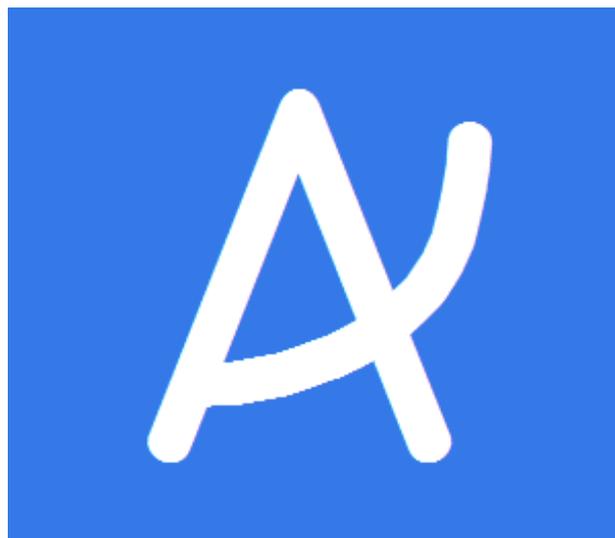
Astrology's root metaphor of the starry heavens underscores all its techniques and methods, no matter what school of thought. No wonder magic is experienced by its practitioners who participate with astrology, whether they are financial or psychological, traditional or modern. But we cannot

appease the rationalists nor allay the criticism of sceptics, as imaginative truths cannot be measured or weighed. Neither are they visible in a test tube or under a microscope. It is the third ear that hears the metaphor and the third eye that sees through the literality of the measured sky into its inspired revelations. Urania and Asteria remind us that the starry night sky was a muse and guide long before we had the means to measure it or articulate its synchrony.

An Asteroid Epilogue

All nine Muses have been enshrined in the heavens as asteroids; Urania is the 30th asteroid and the 5th of the Muses to be named. Urania was discovered on 22 July 1854 in London. Asteria has also been named by A. Kopff who discovered the asteroid on 23 January 1908 in Heidelberg. Being custodians of the starry heavens, both are mythic personifications of meaningful participation with the night sky and therefore images at the heart of pre-philosophical astrology.

In discussing Urania, astrologer Nona Gwynn Press commented that ‘Urania has been prominent in every chart of an astrologer that I have seen’¹² which echoes this mysterious alignment between symbols in heaven and their reflection in human interests. To me both mythic figures underpin the call to astrology through honouring both the imaginative and systematic appreciation of the starry heavens as well as the divinatory and scientific intelligence that is constellated through participation with its eternal images. As icons they offer a way of musing about our participation with astrology.



Urania's Glyph

Ouranus was the grandfather of both Urania and Asteria and symbolically related to them through their association with the starry heavens. Therefore we might not be surprised that in the discovery charts for both Urania and Asteria they are linked with Uranus. However, I must admit I was once again awed by the symmetry and synchrony of it all.¹³ On the day of discovery Asteria was contra-parallel Uranus with a maximum orb of 2' while Urania was discovered contra-parallel Uranus with a maximum orb of 4', each asteroid and Uranus exactly equidistant from the celestial equator on the day of their discovery. Always above us is a meaningful pattern that emerges each night on the vault of the heavens like a dream. Some nights we might remember the dream.

ENDNOTES

¹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, translated by Dorothea Wender, Penguin, London: 1973, lines 1-38.

² See Hugh G. Evelyn Whites' introduction to *Hesiod, Homeric Hymns, Epic Cycles, Homeric* in the The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge: 2002, xix. Plutarch referred to The Astronomy (*Astronomiae*) as Astrology.

³ For the history of this period from an astrological point of view, see Chapter 9 of the masterful *The Dawn of Astrology, A Cultural History of Western Astrology*, Volume 1 by Nicholas Campion, Continuum, London: 2008, 127 – 148.

⁴ Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik, *A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, Penguin Books, India: 2006, xiii.

⁵ I often use the image of Mnemosyne for the secondary progressed Moon, especially the second cycle of the Progressed Moon through the horoscope. See *Secondary Progressions* (Revised 2012) by Brian Clark, An Astro*Synthesis publication – www.astrosynthesis.com.au/.

⁶ In Sanskrit star is Tara and her origins have been tracked to the Mesopotamian goddesses Ishtar and Astarte. Our modern star and Tara are perhaps linked via the Persian *sitara*, the Greek *aster* and the Latin *stella*.

⁷ See Michael Attyah Flower, *The Seer in Ancient Greece*, University of California, Berkley, CA: 2008, 214.

⁸ Hecate in *Theogony* is honoured by Zeus and men for her great powers. She is a triple-goddess of sea, earth and sky, but not particularly associated with divination. This motif develops later through other mythic narratives when Hecate later becomes fused with Artemis and the Moon.

⁹ Aeschylus, *The Eumenides* 4-9, translated by Philip Vellacott, Penguin Books, London: 1959.

¹⁰ While ancient writers such as Pindar, Kallimachos and Apollodorus mention this storyline, *The Homeric Hymn to Apollo* does not detail this at all; in fact Ortygia and Delos appear to be separate islands. Apollodorus in the 2nd C BCE detailed it as 'Asteria changed herself into a quail and threw herself into the sea to avoid intercourse with Zeus and a city called Asteria after her in former times, though later it was called Delos'.

¹¹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 748-57.

¹² Nona Gwynn Press, *New Insights into Astrology*, ACS Publications, San Diego, CA: 1993, 199.

¹³ This reminds me of the pre-verbal participatory world of the heavens that defies description.

