

*A time to remember; a time to forget
A time to speak; a time to dream*

Timelines of Mercury

by Brian Clark

Multifarious, mischievous, magical; descriptions that spring to mind when we mention Mercury. The ancients knew his predecessor Hermes as shifty, cunning in mind, a rustler of cattle and a leader of dreams.¹ As master of the margins, Hermes is a boundary-crosser, always in motion, especially moving about at night – the time of sleep and dreams, of love and larceny. Whatever camouflage, Mercury is there at bends in the road, as we awaken from a dream, when we forget our way, in our conversations and as we turn out the lights. At daybreak or at nightfall, he lingers in the shadows, disappearing in the light or descending into darkness. He awakens, guiding the spirits up from the night realm to watch them fade away through the day light of the 12th house. As the shepherd of dreams, He crosses the western portal to guide us down to the phantasmal night world of sleep.

God of the road, of numbers and words, he is also the god of the classroom. With one wave of his hypnotic wand he can induce sleepiness in the brightest of students. Between alertness and drowsiness we are in Mercurial space, moving between wakefulness and sleep. Mercurial space is often invisible and/or nonsensical – a borderland. And in between intellect and imagination, day and night, logic and symbol we come upon creative ways of knowing.

Mercury's cycle illustrates the sacredness of geometry. Annually there are 3.14 synodic cycles; therefore, the mathematical constant of Pi is outlined on the heavens as Mercury orbits the Sun. This numerical paradigm states that the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter is always approximately 3.14, re-minding us of the mercurial connection between infinity (circle) and linearity (diameter). Mercury is the god of the hieroglyph – the sacred carving. His heavenly hieroglyph is Pi or 3.141 ..² Mathematical Mercury is irrational in the truest sense, in that it is unlimited in possibilities, reminding us of the infinite possibilities of thoughts, ideas and movement. Mercury is at the helm of the horizon; no wonder the ancients said he enjoys the first house, always ready to transition from a night to a day personality.

Mercury is betwixt and between inhabiting liminal and subliminal spaces, a dual, disappearing and dexterous god who endlessly links the narratives of our lives together. He is multifocaled, seeing through lenses of intellect, intuition, interpretation and imagination. Tom Moore so succinctly describes mercurial intelligence as the power – to keep the soul in motion and – the carousel of interpretation moving.³

When we are on thresholds, in transitions, between times, crossing borders or at crossroads, Mercury might appear out of the shadows to lead us into or out of the situation. Mercury is not just interested in ideas, but also in what underpins them, their source, derivation and motivation. He moves between both solar consciousness and lunar intelligence. This is well demonstrated in his earlier relationship with goddesses such as Hecate, Hestia and Mnemosyne with whom he was often paired. Mercury's appearance in our life leads us into and out of our soul's essential experiences. He is the guide to the guru, the unexpected detour, the thought that reconnects us to our dream the night before; he is leader and follower eyeing the landscape in front of and behind us.

Heavenly Mercury

In the heavens His archetypal nature is coherent. Catching a glimpse of Mercury is not easy. The planet is only visible near the horizon in the transitional twilight before sunrise or after sunset, the betwixt and between zone where Mercury is at home. Mercury is observable for a few days when at its greatest separation from the Sun.⁴ Like mythic Mercury, the planet is elusive, difficult to corner. Being

a master traveller, the zodiacal route he tours in the heavens maps out mercurial time with regularity and order.

Being close to the Sun, the skies are never completely darkened when Mercury is discernible. Perched between day and night, the silhouetted Mercury is fleetingly glimpsed at certain times after the Sun sets or before it rises. In his morning apparition Mercury leads souls up from the underworld, guiding them down again at dusk. Ancients knew his two faces as *Psychagogos*, the one who called up the spirits of the dead, and *Psychopompos*, the spectre leading the souls into the night world. Characteristically Mercury lingers on the threshold of sleeping and waking when we are in a distinctive state of consciousness, a state often identified as hypnagogic.⁵ On the borderland, not yet asleep, yet no longer awake, sensory phenomena such as voices and visions, fantasies and phantasms, are often experienced. Mercury's brood inhabit the interval between wakefulness and sleep.

Mercury is identified as an inferior planet, as its orbit is contained by the Earth's. As we look towards the Sun, the orbit of Mercury is enclosed by the Earth's; therefore, inferior. This is an astronomical term, not a judgement, as Mercury is far from inferior. Because of this arrangement, we only see Mercury in a close relationship with the Sun. At its maximum elongation from the Sun, Mercury is never more than 28° away, always ranging between 17 - 28 degrees of zodiacal separation at these times. From our vantage point Mercury and the Sun are a dynamic duo. This astronomical dyad of the Sun and Mercury is consistent in the mythic tales of the brothers, Apollo and Hermes, inspirationally articulated in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* over two and a half millennia ago. Marsilio Ficino described Mercury as being filled with Apollo's.

Being egg-shaped Mercury's orbit is eccentric, characteristic of this god. Its orbital speed varies considerably, ranging from a standstill near its stations to over 2.25° a day at its superior conjunction. Like the Moon, Mercury's synodic cycle goes through phases, a heavenly and helpful time frame when imagining and developing certain projects.⁷

The Sun-Mercury cycle averages 116 days; however, each individual cycle may last 105 - 130 days. We might think of these like academic terms of a year or modules of a course. In its cycle Mercury is conjunct the Sun twice: once when it is closest to the Earth and retrograde (the inferior conjunction) and again when direct on the other side of the Sun (the superior conjunction). Each cycle begins at the inferior conjunction when Mercury is retrograde.⁸

These two conjunctions are turning points in the Mercury/Sun cycle. At the inferior conjunction Mercury leaves its post as the evening star to now rise first, leading the Sun into a new cycle. At the superior conjunction Mercury is on the other side of the Sun, changing position to follow the Sun, becoming considered. At each conjunction Mercury is obscured by the brilliance of the Sun and swaps between the solar and lunar teams. Through the technique of planetary sect our astrological ancestors respected Mercury's temperament by aligning him with the day sect, when he rose before the Sun, and the night camp when he set after the Sun.

This cycle accounts for Mercury's disappearance and reappearance in our skies, as well as its backtracking through the zodiac three times a year. Shape-shifting between the twilight gods of dawn and dusk is consistent with the mercurial disposition: adaptability in changeover times, proficiency in moving between hemispheres, acclimatizing to new arrangements, guiding in transitional zones and linking different states of consciousness. Like his great grandson Ulysses, Mercury is *polytropos* ó a god of many turns and *polymetis* ó a god with much cunning and intelligence.

At the inferior conjunction, the beginning of the cycle, a renewed facet of mercurial development is set in motion. This new Mercury begins a forward striving phase while it is still retrograde and closest to the Earth. At the halfway period, Mercury is direct, fast-moving and farthest from the Earth, now at its most objective and informed point of this cycle. It enters its occidental phase, a more pensive and introspective period. About a week before each conjunction Mercury disappears from our skies

preparing to change focus, visibly rising about a fortnight later having changed allegiances between the day and the night

The inferior conjunction is the midpoint of Mercury’s retrograde period. In the cyclical context of the synodic cycle, Mercury is retrograde just before and after its inferior conjunction, the ending of one cycle and the beginning of another. Mercury turns retrograde 10 ó 11 days before its inferior conjunction ingesting the information, impressions, ideas, impact and senses from the past 3 ó 4 months of its cycle. After the inferior conjunction, Mercury retrograde enables the essence of what has been digested to seed the new cycle. For these next 10 ó 11 days the retrograde period is reformatting and reframing what has been distilled, nourishing the newborn cycle. I often think this part of the cycle is slow motion, allowing us to retrace our steps to become mindful and more conscious of how we move through time. Seen from this perspective Mercury retrograde is an essential part of its cycle, ending one cycle with the Sun and beginning another. While Mercury retrograde events may seemingly appear indiscriminate, they invite us to be considered and reflective.

Therefore the three-week cycle of Mercury retrograde can be seen in two parts: the ending of one cycle and the renewal of the subsequent cycle. Mercury retrograde times are periods of review, clearing the backlog of work, filing completed reports, deleting old programs, attending to the messages you have been avoiding. Now is the time to get caught up with the paper trail that has piled up, finish the assignment you have been postponing, complete the tasks you have been delaying, so that the new cycle can begin with a purer essence of the past cycle.

Backtracking

Mercury’s retrograde patterning is a wonder, but too often this phase of its cycle is sensationalized and exaggerated, a mercurial quality anyway! Mercury retrograde periods can be times of reflection, contemplation and re-thinking so that ideas can be conceived and new patterns of thinking can emerge. The hassles that occur during Mercury Retrograde could be embraced as a contemplative call to deliberating on the distractions that we mindlessly engage in. What appears as a seemingly random act might result in mindfulness and consciousness if one listens, reflects and recognizes that the trickster at work might be unconscious desire. The ancient Greeks recognized these moments in life when a critical discovery or event happened: they called this *anagnorisis* or recognition, the change from ignorance to knowledge, mostly apparent when there was a reversal of fortune. Our misfortunes are never welcomed, but in mercurial parlance this moment of reversal potentially brings new understanding.

One of the features of the Mercury retrograde cycle is that each year it will turn retrograde at approximately the same zodiacal degree as it turned direct eleven months previously.

Year	Stationary Retrograde	Degree	Stationary Direct	Degree	Travel in Degrees	No. of days Retrograde
2018	Nov 17	13♁29	Dec 6	27♏16	15°43	19 days
2019	Mar 5	29♋38	Mar 28	16♋05	13° 32ε	23 days
	Jul 8	4♏27	Aug 1	23♏56	10° 31ε	23 days
	Oct 31	27♏38	Nov 20	11♏35	16° 03ε	20 days
2020	Feb 17	12♋53	Mar 10	28♏12	14°41ε	22 days
	Jun 18	14♏45	Jul 12	5♏29	9°16ε	24 days
	Oct 14	11♏40	Nov 3	25♏53	15°47ε	20 days
2021	Jan 30	26♏29	Feb 21	11♏01	15°28ε	22 days
	May 29	24♏43	June 22	16♏07	8°36ε	23 days
	Sep 27	25♏28	Oct 18	10♏07	14°21ε	21 days
2022	Jan 14	10♏20	Feb 4	24♏22	15°58ε	21 days

As Mercury weaves its way through the zodiac, it picks up the threads from the previous year which may have been overlooked, connecting the phases and weaving them again into the mercurial tapestry. In the table note how every third time Mercury goes retrograde. It links back to where it went stationary direct approximately 11 months previously on October 14, 2020 Mercury will station retrograde at 11♍40, picking up the direct thread of November 20, 2019 at 11♍35, continuously reconnecting the phases together.

Mercury is retrograde 20 - 24 days, three times a year, about 1/6 of its time; therefore, about 18% of all horoscopes will have retrograde Mercury. Mercury has a penchant for threeø as it has three synodic cycles a year. It retrogrades three times a year for approximately 3 weeks. If we plotted these retrograde stations on a zodiacal wheel a triangle would form. For instance, the retrograde stations of Mercury for 2020 occur at 12♋53, 23♏27 and 13♌29 forming a grand trine in water. Mapping the inferior and superior conjunctions separately, two triangles would form the Star of David. While Venus etches a pentagram in the sky, Mercury designs triangles and six-pointed stars.

Going through phases

Each planetary cycle has its own timing. We are often persuaded to see planetary time chronologically, rather than cyclic, rendering us metric rather than symbolic. When considering times for writing an article, completing a major assignment, launching a campaign or applying for a course of study, the mercurial cycle becomes an effective clock to consult. In contemporary life, with so many decisions to be made, the mercurial cycle offers us a unique timetable.

Mercury has apparent crossroads in its synodic cycle: it begins at the inferior conjunction, turns direct, reaches its greatest elongation as the morning star, disappears, then conjoins the Sun again on the other side, reappears, reaches its greatest elongation as the evening star, turns retrograde and then renews its cycle at the next inferior conjunction. Each phase could be seen as stages of the development of one idea or the mind in general.

As we move through the mercurial cycle each phase is an integral aspect of the sequence symbolizing the way we process information and return to and renew ideas. It is also reflective of the way the mind cultivates its concepts and matures its ideas, like phases of thinking something through this is how Mercury outlines it plots. While we might also use eight phases for Mercuryø cycle;⁹ for our purpose, letø think of it in terms of 6 stages, a number resonant with Mercury. The length of each phase varies in each cycle, but the average days are listed below, forming the synodic period average of 116 days.

1. **Inferior Conjunction to Stationary Direct:** this phase includes the morning rise and lasts between 9 and 14 days but on average is approximately 11 days.
2. **Stationary Direct to Greatest Elongation as Morning Star:** this phase includes Mercuryø increasing brightness and greatest brilliance in the morning sky, lasting approximately one to two weeks, but on average is approximately 10 days.
3. **Greatest Elongation to Superior Conjunction:** this is the longest phase which includes Mercuryø morning set and disappearance into the brilliance of the Sun. This phase varies, but lasts approximately 37 days (5 weeks).
4. **Superior Conjunction to Greatest Elongation as Evening Star:** again another long phase including the evening rise as Mercury emerges out from under the Sun beams and increases in brightness. This phase varies, but lasts approximately 37 days (5 weeks).
5. **Greatest Elongation to Stationary Retrograde:** at its brightest in the evening sky Mercury slows to station retrograde. This phase lasts between one and two weeks, but on average is approximately 10 days.
6. **Stationary Retrograde to Inferior Conjunction:** this phase includes the evening set and lasts between 9 and 14 days, but on average is approximately 11 days.

The following table contrasts the speed and light during these phases. The changes in speed and light very much differ from lunar phases due to the Moon orbit of the Earth while Mercury orbits the Sun.

	<i>from</i> Inferior Conjunction to Stationary Direct	<i>from</i> Stationary Direct to Greatest Elongation	Greatest Elongation to Superior Conjunction	<i>from</i> Superior Conjunction to Greatest Elongation	Greatest Elongation to Stationary Retrograde	Stationary Retrograde to Inferior Conjunction
<i>speed</i>	☿	Slower	Faster	Faster	Slower	☿
<i>light</i>	Increasing	Increasing	Decreasing	Increasing	Decreasing	Decreasing
<i>Rudhyar phase</i>	Promethean Retrograde	Promethean Direct		Epimethean Direct		Epimethean Retrograde
<i>% of cycle</i>	9.5%	40.5%		40.5%		9.5%

We can imagine each of these phases as having tasks in the context of the cycle moving through time.

Phase	Task
Inferior Conjunction Stationary Direct	Mercury guides the spirits of the last cycle out of the underworld so their essence may be brought to light and serve in the reformation of a new cycle.
Stationary Direct Greatest Elongation	Instinctive and remembered intentions, initiatives and ideas are at a crossroads with new ways of thinking that are brightening and developing into projects and plans.
Greatest Elongation Superior Conjunction	New ideas and insight inspire the Geminian spirit to find a way forward with new strategies. The Virgo attitude of discrimination, focus, and craft can later be applied to bring the ideas to manifestation through application and work.
Superior Conjunction to Greatest Elongation as Evening Star	This is the time to reflect and harvest insights and initiatives that have been applied towards the goal. It is time to disseminate the design, share the products of your creative process, and articulate your process.
Greatest Elongation Stationary Retrograde	Thinking becomes more introspective and philosophical. A review of the processes and output of the past cycle in underway ó how can these ideas improve and be implemented?
Stationary Retrograde Inferior Conjunction	It is time to gather in ideas and, in the privacy of personal space, reflect on what has taken place for future reference. Time to complete the project for this round.

Now we can apply these phases to some actual timeframes. Following are some dates for 2020 ó 21 organized by phase to help plan and to involve yourself with any upcoming projects, courses, study, assignments, communications or rehearsals. We might not be able to change the times, but we can participate in them more consciously these mercurial timelines are one way to consider how.

Phases of the Mercury Cycle	2020 - 21 Dates UT	Mercurial Time
Inferior Conjunction to Stationary Direct	Feb 26, 2020 ó Mar 10, 2020 Jul 1, 2020 ó Jul 12, 2020 Oct 25, 2020 ó Nov 3, 2020 Feb 8, 2021 ó Feb 21, 2021 Jun 11, 2021 ó Jun 22, 2021 Oct 9, 2021 ó Oct 18, 2021	A new phase begins, born from the seeds of previous cycles. Mercury becomes the morning star; now more forward-thinking and progressive in planning and scheming. New ideas, projects, ways of thinking and patterns of communication come to light to be developed throughout the course of the new cycle.
Stationary Direct to Greatest Elongation as Morning Star	Mar 10, 2020 ó Mar 24, 2020 Jul 12, 2020 ó Jul 22, 2020 Nov. 3, 2020 ó Nov 11, 2020 Feb 21, 2021 ó Mar 6, 2021 Jun 22, 2021 ó Jul 5, 2021 Oct 18, 2021 ó Oct 25, 2021	Instinctive and remembered ways of thinking are at a crossroads with new developments taking place. Former projects, research, ideas, or studies may return to be redeveloped. Directions and decisions are considered. What was left unattended or incomplete from the last cycle is reviewed and integrated or discarded.
Greatest Elongation to Superior	Mar 24, 2020 ó May 4, 2020 Jul 22, 2020 ó Aug 17, 2020 Nov 11, 2020 ó Dec 20, 2020 Mar 6, 2021 ó Apr 19, 2021	At Mercury's greatest distance from the Sun, a critical change occurs. Ideas and insight release the mercurial spirit to forge a way forward with new plans. Application and attention to working on and managing the project is

Conjunction	Jul 5, 2021 ó Aug 1, 2021 Oct 25, 2021 ó Nov 29, 2021	heightened. Discrimination, focus, and craft bring the emergent and creative ideas into the public domain.
Superior Conjunction to Greatest Elongation as Evening Star	May 4, 2020 ó Jun 4, 2020 Aug 17, 2020 ó Oct 1, 2020 Dec 20, 2020 ó Jan 23, 2021 Apr 19, 2021 ó May 17, 2021 Aug 1, 2021 ó Sep 14, 2021 Nov 29, 2021 ó Jan 8, 2022	At the superior conjunction initiatives, assignments and designs approach their fruition. Mercury becomes the evening star, more introspective and reflective. The maturing ideas can deepen; time to disseminate the design and share the produce of your creative process. Use the feedback constructively to improve the product.
Greatest Elongation to Stationary Retrograde	Jun 4, 2020 ó Jun18, 2020 Oct 1, 2020 ó Oct 14, 2020 Jan 23, 2021 ó Jan 30, 2021 May 17, 2021 ó May 29, 2021 Sep 14, 2021 ó Sep 27, 2021 Jan 8, 2022 ó Jan 14, 2022	Thinking becomes more introspective and philosophical. Time to edit, review, and articulate the process that you have been through. It is the phase when adjusting the process, fine-tuning the project and correcting the mistakes will help complete the assignment and offer insights and revelations into the process.
Stationary Retrograde to Inferior Conjunction	Jun 18, 2020 ó Jul 1, 2020 Oct 14, 2020 ó Oct. 25, 2020 Jan 30, 2021 ó Feb 8, 2021 May 29, 2021 ó Jun 11, 2021 Sep 27, 2021 ó Oct 9, 2021 Jan 14, 2022 ó Jan 23, 2022	As the cycle moves towards the inferior conjunction what was brought to light can be completed, refined and analyzed for future cycles. It is the time to gather in ideas and in the depth and privacy of the self, journal and contemplate what has taken place for personal development and future reference.

We can of course personalize the cycle through considering our natal Mercury its phase, sign, house and aspects and reflect on how we best adapt to mercurial transitions. Transiting Mercury's zodiacal sign and aspects at any moment flavour the phase it is passing through. Being aware of this rhythm helps me to remember a broader perspective that Mercury is going through a phase and this moment is part of a larger process, a fuller cycle.

I keep a Mercury journal. It is distinct from my dream journal, but similar in a way. I use the phases as chapters, having pages for each of Mercury's phases, and here I write my ideas, my daytime dreams, projects and preparations, my thoughts, images that have stayed with me, conversations that have engaged me and connections that I felt were special. Mostly it is what comes to mind, what is on my mind, sometimes it is nevermind. I note where Mercury is at the time I am writing.

Mercury loves journals and so do I ó handcrafted, sensual to touch, beautiful to look at and evocative of the classical past. And between the pages there is homage to the god of words and imagination.

ENDNOTES

¹ óThe Homeric Hymn to Hermes ó from the *Homeric Hymns*, translated by Michael Cruden, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK: 2001.

² See Brian Clark. óMercury Pi in the Skyó, *The Mountain Astrologer*, December 2018/January 2019 edition.

³ Thomas Moore, *The Planets Within*, Lindifarne Press, Great Barrington, MA: 1990, 153.

⁴ Mercury is observable for only a few days in its cycle when it reaches greatest elongation from the Sun. This occurs alternately in the morning and evening skies. When it sets a short time after the Sun, it is visible in early evening twilight. When it rises before the Sun, it is visible shortly before sunrise. Some of these six times of the year are more favourable for viewing Mercury than others and of these there is a possibility of 3 times in the northern and 3 times in the southern hemisphere. I like the In-The-Sky.org website which provides so much information about the planets. For Mercury's visible appearances, see: https://in-the-sky.org/news.php?id=20200210_11_101&town=2160517/.

⁵ For a thorough and engaging scientific study of this in between zone see: Andreas Mavromatis, *Hypnagogia, The Unique State of Consciousness between Wakefulness and Sleep*, Thyrsos Press, London: 2010.

⁶ Ficino, *Opera*, 542 as referenced in Thomas Moore, *The Planets Within*, 148.

⁷ Phase comes from the Greek *phasis* and *phainein*, suggesting ‘bringing to light’, an ‘appearance’ or ‘showing’. The word can be used in many ways; when referencing time it suggests distinctive periods in an ongoing process of change.

⁸ This cycle is known as the *synodic* cycle. Synod originates in the Greek, which means a meeting or assembly and can be applied to a conjunction of planets, *synodic*. *Syn* means together and *hodos* refers to going or a way; therefore the synod suggests a planetary dialogue which goes a certain direction or way. There are different schools of thought whether the beginning of the synodic cycle of Mercury and Venus begins with at the ‘inferior’ or ‘superior’ conjunction.

⁹ In my article ‘Mercury Pi in the Sky’, *The Mountain Astrologer*, <https://www.astrosynthesis.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Mercury-Pi-in-the-Sky.pdf>, I experiment with the 8-fold approach, p.47.

Brian Clark has been an astrological counsellor for most of his adult life. He has facilitated seminars and tours worldwide, written books and articles and with his partner Glennys Lawton developed and taught in their four-year astrological program *Astro*Synthesis*, which is now a comprehensive distance learning program (www.astrosynthesis.com.au). The couple now live in northern Tasmania, and although he continues to lecture worldwide. Brian’s newest book is *Soul, Symbol & Imagination: The Artistry of Astrology*.

