

Dicing with the Gods: Experiments in Astro-Lithomancy

“Mumbo-jumbo” Alert!

If you're easily upset by anyone “monkeying” in an unconventional way with widely-recognized and generally accepted methods of divination, stop reading now! I'm a tireless tinkerer with those methods I choose to explore, with a bottomless appetite for new ideas (except where deviation from the prescribed path – such as in ceremonial magic – might be dangerous). As much as I revere tradition, I'm perfectly comfortable trying different approaches to achieve the same end. Let's just say I'm a “true believer” in the essence but a “skeptic in the details.”

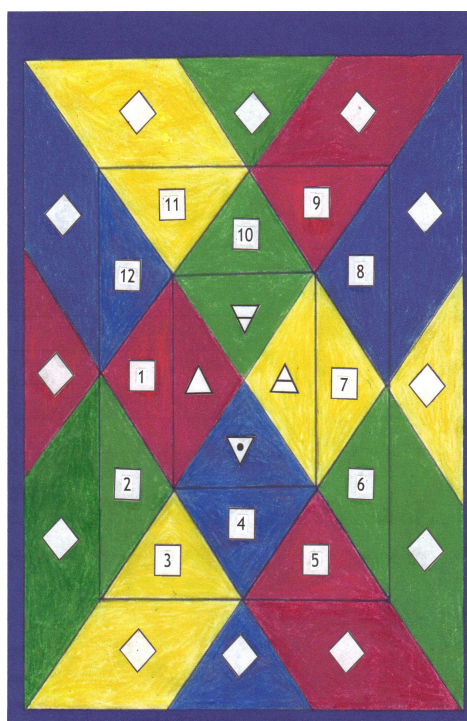
To continue . . .

Lithomancy is the practice of divining the future by reading the patterns formed by stones dropped or thrown onto a prepared surface. In this regard it is akin to reading the auguries in leaves at the bottom of a teacup, in a flock of birds in flight, or in the entrails of a ritually sacrificed beast. It is so obscure in modern Western cultures that it is virtually invisible, with little published information available to the curious seeker. As a practitioner of geomancy, in which I randomly pull groups of stones from a larger population to generate the odd and even numbers required by the geomantic method, I recently became interested in this parallel technique of reading the relationships between the stones themselves. However, I wasn't up to memorizing an entirely new set of rules for interpretation of the various patterns.

Geomancy has an extension known as astro-geomancy that involves placing the planets and signs associated with the geomantic figures into the houses of an astrological horoscope chart and reading their combination as a quasi-astrological “event chart.” It struck me that, rather than dropping the stones onto a cloth or other generic surface as is normally done in lithomancy, it might be revealing to toss them instead onto a specially-devised horoscope chart, thus treating them as planetary factors in signs and houses to be read in a pseudo-astrological manner similar to astro-geomancy. However, unlike astro-geomancy, where the same planet can appear multiple times in different houses of the chart, in “astro-lithomancy” each one would appear only once. This allows a more conventional reading of the planetary sign and house positions. Planetary aspects would be read between general sign positions only, not actual degrees of separation, exactly as they are read in astro-geomancy and to some extent in ancient astrology.

The Chart Structure

The first step is to devise a horoscope chart that is large enough to accommodate the usually vigorous scattering of stones dropped or thrown onto it, with no “dead spots” or multi-angle intersections where accurate planetary “house” positions would be difficult or impossible to establish. Below is an example of such a chart, which will be described in detail later. It would be a good idea to set the chart in a close-fitting box, tub or frame deep enough to prevent the cast stones from sliding off the chart surface. Unlike traditional lithomancy, where stones that escape the reading area are simply disregarded by the reader, each stone in astro-lithomancy represents a specific planet and must remain “in play.”



The Planets

Next, a set of stones must be assembled to serve as planetary surrogates. They can be gathered from the soil, but they should be fairly uniform in size and must be small enough for three or four to fit comfortably into a single “house” of the horoscope chart, thereby forming a “planetary stellium.” Also, some means of differentiating them according to planetary “signature” must be employed. Painting them traditional colors (such as yellow for the Sun, red for Mars, etc.) is one of the best methods. Alternatively, tumbled stones can be purchased that are both smooth to the touch and pleasing to the eye, in a variety of natural and dyed colors that provide for a sufficient number of unique “planetary” designations. Colored glass “stones” are similarly available. Small buttons, “found” items or “sortilege” can also be used, but that approach would depart considerably from the Earth-centered “vibration” of the natural stones. If you’re really bent on maximum efficiency and minimum effort, you can simply find one stone that you like and throw it multiple times for the number of planets and sensitive points you prefer to use. I for one like the “flash” of seeing all of the planets careening around the solar system and watching them come “home” to the houses. (Hint: see the title!)

A fourth possibility, while also a departure from the tradition of using actual stones, is to buy a bag of colored alphabet beads at a craft store, from which you can select beads with a suitable letter/color combination to represent each planet: orange “S” for the Sun, violet “S” for Saturn; blue “M” for Mercury, red “M” for Mars, violet “M” for the Moon, and so forth. Another advantage is that they have a hole through them which sometimes lands face-up when cast, allowing them to be given a subtle variation of meaning, such as “retrogradation.” They are cube-shaped, suggestive of the number “4” and the element Earth, and therefore can be equated to actual stones through this elemental association. Finally, they are quite small (1/4” or so) and work well together within the physical confines of the chart. (See the next figure.) This is the method I will use to illustrate the text.



There is one further consideration regarding the stones or tokens. If you are accustomed to a traditional (i.e. Medieval or Renaissance) approach to astrology, you will need only seven “planetary” stones and, should you choose to use it, one “Part of Fortune” stone. A modern astrological approach requires a minimum of ten “planetary” stones, one for “Part of Fortune if used, and others as necessary for asteroids and “sensitive points.”.

The Question

Once the “casting” surface is prepared and the stones are ready, the next step is to determine the question to be answered by the completed “event chart.” This method of divination is not suitable for “Yes or No” answers; it should be used to examine the condition of the “departments of life” (astrological houses) directly applicable to the querent and the question, the surrounding circumstances and influences as described by the other houses in the chart, and the forces (planetary energies, both singly and in combination) at work in the matter and available to the querent, or operating through external agencies such as the actions of other people. Once the question has been determined, decide which of the houses best describes the situation or environment in which the matter resides. Any good natal astrology text will explain the nature of the houses in detail (see the bibliography); briefly they are as follows*:

First House – Querent's personality; querent's appearance; querent's physical condition

Second House – Querent's money; income; bank accounts; gain or loss; movable possessions; querent's value-system; feelings of self-worth or lack thereof

Third House – Siblings; communication; books; letters; messages; conversations; documents; written agreements; lower education; teachers; short-duration, local or regional travel

Fourth House – “End of the matter” (outcome of the question); ancestors; the father (or the mother); family; home; land; real estate; agriculture; family inheritance

Fifth House – Children; pleasure; parties; amusements; romance; love affairs; courtships; games; gambling; lotteries; hobbies; sports; recreation; vacations; adventures; casual sex

Sixth House – Querent's health; illness; disease; doctors; nurses; healing; medicine; occupation; working environment; co-workers; employees; pets; food-related activities

Seventh House – Partner; partnerships; business associates; contractual relations; marriage; separation; divorce; legal adversaries; lawyers; settlements; competition; opponents; open enemies; quarrels

Eighth House – Shared possessions; joint savings; loans; mortgages; bankruptcy; debts; obsessions; compulsions; death; investigations; inquests; insurance; taxes; wills; estates (inherited); surgery; research; sex with commitment

Ninth House - Philosophy; science; religion; metaphysics; higher education; mentors or gurus; publishing; court system; exploration; long-duration or long-distance travel; foreign countries; foreigners

Tenth House – Career; profession; businesses; authority figures; leaders; management; honor; achievements; fame; reputation; scandal; politicians; law enforcement; government; the mother (or the father)

Eleventh House – Friends; acquaintances; platonic relationships; groups; clubs; organizations; conventions; societies; associations; goals; hopes and wishes

Twelfth House – Hidden things; institutions; asylums; prisons; reformatories; hospitals; hospitalization; confinement; imprisonment; illegal drugs and addictions; psychic abilities; psychosis; secret enemies; subversion; suicide; exile; seclusion; welfare and charity recipients

* These are some of the most common traditional meanings used for centuries by a great many astrologers.

The question should be written down, and the assigned “house of the question” should also be recorded.

A Caveat

It should be noted at this juncture that the “astrology” employed in this practice is more symbolic than technical. The mechanics used to create the chart and populate it with signs and planets are syncretic in nature (i.e. a “combination of different forms of practice”) rather than homogeneous, in much the same way that the astrological associations for tarot cards or geomantic figures are syncretic. They smack more of “magic” than “method.” Once the chart is - quite literally - “cast,” however, the reading of it follows generally accepted astrological techniques. The other major exception beyond the non-mathematical origin of the chart figure is in the analysis of angular “aspects” between the planets. In a conventional horoscope, these are established according to the degrees of longitudinal separation between the planets along the ecliptic, as they appeared in the sky at the moment of birth or at the time an “event chart” was drawn up. In astro-lithomancy, as in astro-geomancy and certain preliminary practices of traditional astrology, they are established according to separation by sign only. Thus, two planets that are in the same sign are automatically conjunct, in adjacent signs they are semi-sextile, when two signs apart they are sextile, a three-sign separation denotes a square, four a trine, five a quincunx and six an

opposition. This approach does not permit consideration of other minor aspects like semi-squares, quintiles, septiles, sesqui-quadrates, etc, and the only “cross-sign” aspects occur when a stone “bridges” the cusp of two adjacent houses as described below. Furthermore, since they can fall anywhere in the astro-lithomancy chart when it is cast, some “rectification” of the positions of Mercury and Venus is usually required to bring them within the same limited “range” of the Sun that they experience in the sky. This will also be described in detail later.

The Ascending Sign and the House Cusps

Now we must determine the Ascending sign for the chart and the signs on the other house cusps. This is done using only the “planetary” stones, either the traditional seven or the modern ten. Place the stones in your hand or in a small container and, without looking at them, randomly draw one out. Determine which sign the associated planet rules, noting that if you are using a traditional 7-planet approach, five of them will rule more than one of the 12 signs, and with a modern approach two of them will do so. For dual-rulership planets, determining whether to place the first sign of rulership on the Ascendant or the second one requires a simple “yes/no” or “odd/even” decision. For example, flip a coin or cast a single die: “heads” or an odd “pip” count could denote the first sign and “tails” or an even “pip” count would therefore indicate the other rulership sign.

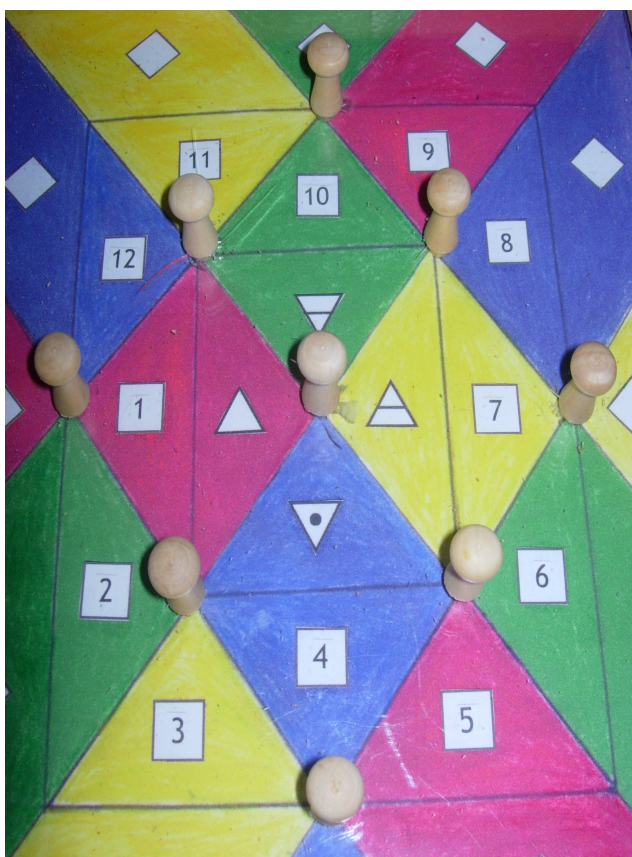
A second option, if you have a birth horoscope for the querent, would be to select the same sign for the Ascendant that is rising in the nativity, especially if the question is focused on a personal issue and not on externally-controlled matters or the actions of other people. In my particular practice, if I have already performed an astro-geomancy divination for the same question, I will use the Ascendant sign established in that manner. The resulting sign is marked at the chart Ascendant and the rest of the signs following it are entered at the house cusps in counter-clockwise order around the chart. If you don't want to deface your special “casting” chart, use a separate horoscope chart blank to record these entries and all subsequent chart data. I put a plexiglass cover over my master chart and write the cusp signs on that with a “dry-erase” marker. (See the next two figures.)

Other Structural Considerations

Once the sign/house correspondences are established, the planets can be “cast” onto the chart. As mentioned earlier, though, some method must be devised to prevent the stones from landing in areas of the chart where they can't be read easily (or at all!) as being in one house or another. Standard horoscope blanks usually have an empty center representing the location of the Earth, and a substantial amount of “white space” around the outside of the wheel. In the example chart, I have eliminated these by extending the “house” zones into both of these “dead spots” so planetary stones landing there will have meaning. However, in doing so I created the possibility that a stone could land such that it “bridges” more than two adjacent houses. (A side note: “bridging” across the cusp of two consecutive houses - as conferred by a stone landing on the dividing line between them - is acceptable and should be read as the planet departing one house and emerging into the next - “on the cusp” in standard astrological terms. Both houses are read as being under the influence of the planet, one in a receding manner - “passing away” - and the other as approaching or growing in strength. You may also choose to shift the stone to the side where more of it “overhangs” and read it wholly in one house, since the split placement is seldom exact. (Think of it as “tidying up” the layout for reading, or “trimming the sails”).

Any method that will block the multi-house “collision points” from accepting a stone will work as long as it resists being dislodged by the throw and doesn't seriously diminish the active portion of the

houses: push pins, small pewter figurines, heavy chess pieces, etc. In the example chart (see below). I covered the printed figure with a plexiglass sheet, so I drilled holes in that at the appropriate locations and inserted wooden posts. (If you do this, be aware that aggressively drilling through the sheet can crack the material when the drill exits the back side, so go slowly at that point!) These considerations may only apply when using the Medieval-style “square” horoscope chart that creates compound angles when extended. A round chart with the house cusps radially extended both outwardly and inwardly would not be subject to this anomaly. However, the central circle would have “pieces of pie” that might be too small to accommodate a single stone, much less a planetary “stellium.” Two options are available: make a very large “casting” chart and use small stones, or block this area off entirely with a cylinder of some sort. I don't recommend the latter since it will severely restrict the random movement of the stones around the chart when they are dropped or thrown.



The “Operation”

Take your stones in hand, either concentrate on the question or clear your mind of all thought (there are two divergent opinions on this among “diviners,” so use the one you like), and drop or throw the stones onto the chart surface. If you have set it up right, all of the stones will land such that they can be read as being in one horoscope house or another (or on a cusp between two of them), and as being in specific “sign” aspect to one another. If using the bead cubes and they land “hole-side-up,” they can be given added emphasis. Except for the Sun, Moon and Part of Fortune, I read them as “retrograde” since there are well-established interpretations for this phenomenon.

A brief note on Mercury and Venus. Astronomically, Mercury never travels farther than 28° from the Sun, so it is limited to a “conjunct” relationship between the two. No matter where it falls in the chart, move the Mercury stone to the same house as the Sun and treat them as conjunct for the purpose of

reading. Venus is a little more complex to rectify. That planet can never be more than roughly 48° from the Sun, so aspects between the two are limited to the conjunction, the semi-sextile and the semi-square (since the “aspect by sign” approach doesn't permit seeing semi-squares, disregard the last one). If they aren't already in the same or adjacent houses, Venus must be moved to another house closer to the Sun's position to maintain an acceptable astronomical interval. But which one? Here is my preferred solution: if the Venus stone landed in the house exactly opposite the Sun's location, move it to the Sun's house to create a conjunction. If it landed in the Sun's house or either of the adjacent houses, leave it there. If it landed two to five houses ahead of the Sun (in the counter-clockwise direction), move Venus clockwise to the house immediately ahead of the Sun (symbolically creating the departing or separating “semi-sextile” aspect). If it landed two to five houses behind the Sun (in the clock-wise direction), move Venus counter-clockwise to the house immediately behind the Sun (symbolically creating the approaching or applying “semi-sextile” aspect). Beyond this nod to scientific authenticity, I read the planetary stones where they fall.

Here is the full system in action, “tidied up” for presentation. Uranus and Pluto were in fact “retrograde” as-cast, Mercury originally landed in the 10th house and Venus in the 9th house. Note Pluto's “on-the-cusp” position between the 4th and 5th houses.. Following it is the astrological data transcribed onto a standard square “Medieval” horoscope blank. No specific question was asked in developing this example.



For the astrological neophyte, the following brief bibliography will get you started in a practical, relatively painless ways. Experienced astrologers will obviously have their own favorites.

“The Astrologer's Handbook“ Frances Sakoian and Louis S. Acker

One of the better “basic astrology” texts; it's not “lost in the ozone” like some of the psychoanalysis-inspired offerings, and it may be all you need for the present purpose.

“Tetrabiblos” Ptolemy

The “grand-daddy” of all astrological tomes; available on-line as a free “pdf” file.

“Christian Astrology” William Lilly

Published in 1647 and not markedly “Christian” as far as I can tell; it's expensive and the language is musty, but the content is fantastic, focusing primarily on horary questions.

“Horoscope Symbols” Rob Hand

Especially the “Core Meanings” sections for signs, houses and aspects.

“The Horary Reference Book, Volume 1” Anne Ungar and Lillian Huber

Notable for its exhaustive tables of house keywords and brief meanings.

“Dynamics of Aspect Analysis: New Perceptions in Astrology” Bill Tierny

Primarily person-centered rather than event-based but, because it deals largely with aspect complexes as opposed to individual orb-delimited aspects, it has some value here; it also includes extensive coverage of retrograde planets.

“The Combination of Stellar Influences” Reinhold Ebertin

The overall subject is advanced but the planetary sign and house delineations are classically concise and even-handed.; however, the planetary mid-point complexes that constitute the “combinations” have little application here, since analyzing these relationships strictly by sign position is impractical. But try it for the major aspects if you want to.

Author's Coda

To those of you who have read through to the end, I salute you. Hopefully you had some fun with this and maybe picked up a stimulating idea or two. For those of you who choked on the “mumbo-jumbo” disclaimer but read through anyway, I leave you with the immortal words of Hamlet: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”