

## A Legacy for the Ages

A Tribute to Robert Schmidt (December 22, 1950 - December 6, 2018) & Ellen Black (May 30, 1944 – May 10, 2023)

Robert H. Schmidt III (Bob) was born in Rock Island, Illinois and grew up in Milan, Minnesota. His father was a school teacher and his mother provided him with an idyllic childhood filled with chemistry sets and butterfly chasing. Robert found out about St. John's College from a friend who went there a year before him, who hand wrote Euclid's first few Propositions in a letter and sent it to Robert to show him the mathematics they were doing there. Totally enchanted, Robert never looked back; he turned down a full scholarship to MIT and headed to St. John's College. While at St. John's, Robert was deeply influenced by two teachers in particular: Jacob Klein and Thomas MacDonald.



Ellen Loehr Black was born and grew up in a prominent family in Cumberland, Maryland. Her father was the general manager of the local newspaper, and her mother was an elaborate entertainer. Ellen was also educated at St. John's, having come there after trials at other colleges. Like Robert, Ellen was deeply influenced by Mr. Klein and Mr. MacDonald. She often shared the story of her palpable relief upon meeting Mr. MacDonald, because she had nearly despaired of ever finding the teacher whom she had been seeking all her life. She told a classmate that she wanted to find a husband who had a mind like Mr. MacDonald's, and the classmate told her he knew someone just like that. Robert and Ellen were married in the Great Hall at St. John's in 1971.



Ellen and Robert spent an additional 6 years in Annapolis, where they were able to continue their affiliation with their teachers while Robert

worked at the St. John's print shop. Robert continued studying Ancient Greek and German philosophy and translating works from Greek, Latin, German and French. In 1985, they founded the Golden Hind Press, a publishing company for his translation projects. The Golden Hind Press was originally devoted to the translation of relatively unfamiliar works in the history of mathematics, science, and logic. Through the Golden Hind Press, they published "Algebra Geometrica Paolo Bonasoni" circa 1575, "The Early Theory of Equations: on Their Nature and Constitution - translations of three treatises, by Viète, Girard and De Beaune," "Recipients, Commonly Called the Data," a translation of Euclid, and other translations and commentary.

As part of their work with the Golden Hind Press, Ellen and Robert published a journal called "Hindsight." The journal was devoted to commentary on the works he was translating, and the history and philosophy of mathematics in general. Robert wrote about "the art of Hindsight," and described the rewards of understanding the thoughts of great thinkers as they themselves conceived them, rather than through our modern lens. He held out for himself the goal of understanding great works on their own terms, seeing the concepts as though he were peering over the shoulder of the great thinker themselves. Even in this early period of his career, Schmidt considered himself a "Restorer of Lost Arts."

## **A Vast and Mysterious Continent**

In 1993, Robert and Ellen began Project Hindsight, an extension of their translation project specifically dedicated to the translation of astrological works that had never been translated before. They wrote of this endeavor:

Project Hindsight was founded in 1993 for the purpose of translating the surviving texts of the Western astrological tradition into English and making them available to the astrological community. At its inception, Project Hindsight was something of a gamble. It was by no means certain that we would find anything of capital importance even for astrologers by undertaking to translate and study the original source texts of Western astrology.

Nevertheless, we had high expectations. We knew that in every other case where Greek writings of the classical or Hellenistic periods had been initially dismissed as either trivial (the dialogues of Xenophon) or as evidence of the decline of classical thought (the philosophy and logic of the Stoics), more careful study had subsequently reversed that premature verdict. We also knew that, historically, episodes of intense translation activity were associated with periods of renaissance in a given field, particularly when such activity had been supported by the belief that some "pearl of great price" might be found in the ancient texts of a "golden age." It seemed to us that it was still possible to entertain such a notion in astrology.

We took as our model the great program of the late Renaissance that sought to restore the lost art of ancient algebra and ended up founding modern mathematics. We even felt a certain close kinship with the mathematical archaeologists of that time, since in their day algebra did not have the countenance of the universities. Algebra was regarded by some as one of the occult disciplines and was occasionally even tarred with the brush of "black art" — a curious role reversal.

Finally, we knew from our own experience, as well as the example of the mathematical restorers, that immersion in past thought was an excellent way of gaining some distance and clarity about modern thinking in a given discipline, in the same way that the study of a foreign language is acknowledged to enhance the understanding of one's native language. For all these reasons, we thought that our project was worth undertaking.....

...It was helpful to us that most of the Greek texts had already been critically edited, so at least we did not have to work from handwritten manuscripts. These texts stretched before us like a vast and mysterious continent, at once enticing and intimidating. Particularly intriguing was the mysterious and voluminous *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum*, or CCAG for short, consisting of short or fragmentary astrological treatises gleaned from European libraries that had remained virtually unread and unstudied for hundreds of years.....

....Astrology is obviously a major incongruity in modern consciousness and its persistence into modern times is a puzzle. The typical modern thinker's automatic, vigorous, and contemptuous rejection of this ancient discipline says more about modern thought than it does about astrology's own intrinsic merits. Astrology was taken seriously by many fine minds in the past, and has been a major force in all ancient cultures, leaving its imprint on their arts, artifacts, religions, and sciences well past the threshold of modern times. Historical considerations alone would entitle it to more than an unceremonious consignment to the trash heap of ancient superstitions. However, the most important reason to look seriously at astrology may be that it presents modern thought with a rare and golden opportunity to contemplate its own shadow and to consider its own contours anew.

## Lost Continent Explored

Schmidt's body of work with regards to Ancient Greek astrology can be divided generally into three categories: the translations, the reconstruction of the system itself, and the discovery of the Ancient Greek cosmology embedded fundamentally into the system.

The three intertwining epochs in the progression of Schmidt's corpus can be appreciated in the listening of his lectures, or "talks" as he called them. In the early lectures, Schmidt is bringing his unique perspective on the history of philosophy to bear on the new material he has been translating, trying to make sense of Ancient material that had not (with the exception of Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*) seen the light of day in millennia.

Arguably the most engaging Plato scholar of our time, Schmidt explored Plato's irreducible principles of the One and the Dyad as they related to the cosmology he was uncovering. He also explored deeply the interplay of the Greek concepts of *logos* ("a speaking that unconceals") and his unique rendering of *phasis* ("an appearance that speaks.") Schmidt maintained that the pre-Socratic mind had the character of *phasis*, lending itself more to oracular presentation, that Plato shifted the focus to *logos*, and that Greek astrology was the only



historical representation of a philosophy where *logos* and *phasis* were equally weighted. In Schmidt's view, this unique standing made Greek astrology a valuable subject in the history of thought itself. Notable lectures from this period include *Same and Other*, *Celestial Grammar: Logos*, and *Being and the Zodiac*.

Close friend Matthew Wood, of the Matthew Wood Institute of Herbalism, observed, "Coming to understand *logos* and *phasis*, through Bob's teaching, was one of the most

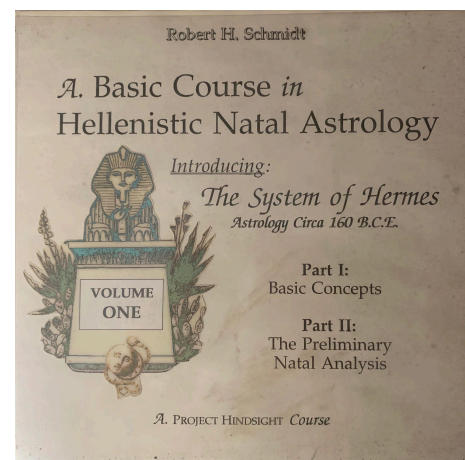


important spiritual discoveries of my life. Bob could explain the origin and continuing differences between the linear, time-and-space-bound mentality of Western culture, based on *logos*, especially the syllogism ("if...then...") But he also explained the original and indigenous method of thought and speech, *phasis*, based on "allowing the thing to speak for itself" and expansion on that through non-linear inferences, comparisons, wordplays, and

intuitive flashes. This explained the great gap between the West and indigenous societies; between dogmas imposed by "irrefutable arguments" or "scientific proof" and the true freedom of thought, imagination, and intuition innate to creative human thinking."

## Lost Continent Mapped

In the next phase of discovery, Schmidt reconstructed the "nuts and bolts" of Greek astrology itself. He began to refer to it as "Hellenistic Astrology," because the writings that survive, though written in Greek, date to the Hellenistic period. Not yet knowing the true origin of the astrology, he settled on the conservative position of naming it after the era of the surviving writings. The work he did in restoring the original astrology is of major significance to the history of science. Though the remnants of the original system survive in a reduced and nominal form in modern astrology, Schmidt reconstructed an intricate, self-reinforcing system of concepts and techniques that were previously unknown to astrologers and historians of science alike. Schmidt brought to light astrological concepts such as sect, Hermetic lots, planetary configuration, zodiacal releasing, and more. In fact, each new astrological term brought forward was coined by Schmidt as he produced the translations. Schmidt named the system as a whole





“The System of Hermes,” after the legendary founder referenced in the source texts, Hermes Trismegistus. Notable lectures from this period include *Discourse on Method*, *Zodiacal Releasing from Spirit*, and *Whither and Whence*.

Hellenistic era bibliophile Roger Pearse commented thus: “Few of us would find it possible to read an ancient astrological text with any enjoyment. Yet he [Schmidt] evidently did. Most people who read such a text would find themselves baffled by the technical language. But he was not baffled. I do not myself possess any overview of the subject of Hellenistic Astrology; and evidently Mr Schmidt found the same, for he composed one. He made all these translations, and did so from hard, granite-like material in Greek and Latin. The world owes him a debt for so doing. Few professional academics have ever even attempted such a thing. He did not receive recognition or honour for what he did. But I suspect that little that has been written on astrology in the universities in the last 30 years will be half as useful or well-informed as his little series of self-published books.”

In true St. John’s fashion, Robert and Ellen built a lively and robust community around their intellectual endeavors. Almost every lecture occurred over multiple days and was hosted at their own home, often including food and lodging. Lectures had names that reflected this atmosphere, such as “The Nine-Day Wonder Houseparty: Translating Hellenistic Astrology into a Modern Idiom,” or “Heidegger at our House Party.” They hosted five larger conferences that they called “Conclaves,” that included additional hosted speakers. The first Conclave, held in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia in 1994 has been described by many as a watershed moment and a once in a lifetime experience. Robert and Ellen were always inclusive. The marketing description for their “Get into Phase” lecture states, “And while they reach for the stars, they [the lectures] are totally down to earth. Both the educated and those with little or no formal training routinely find them compelling and vitally important. This comes as no surprise – as Robert is fond of saying, ‘Inquiry into first principles is a game anyone with a mind can play...’”



Fostering a community around Robert’s work was Ellen’s forte. She recognized and appreciated Robert’s bright light and expansive intellect, and orchestrated their life in order to support his unique path. Ellen planned the events, cooked for the crowds, hosted with grace, and participated in the lectures and lively discussions. In 1998, Robert and Ellen moved into Ellen’s childhood mansion, and it proved an ideal venue for hosting events. Ellen fulfilled two roles well;

both the quintessential strong woman behind a great man, and an equal partner in a life’s work.

During this time, Schmidt began working on a comprehensive course showcasing all the Hellenistic concepts and techniques he had reconstructed. He was piloting this course, and had the unfortunate experience of having his work appropriated from him and published. Schmidt wrote of this experience, “Shortly after I had actually begun to record, I learned that much of what I planned to put into my *Part One* was already being taught as an *entire course* on Hellenistic Astrology offered and sold on the internet. When I read and listened to it, I found that virtually everything in it was taken from my work, often repeating my own words, but it was an inanimate caricature of my presentations of Hellenistic astrology, as would be expected from anyone who has not done his own research. This distressing experience—seeing my life’s work reflected back at me from this lifeless mirror—stopped me dead in my tracks.” As for the community interested in the field of Hellenistic astrology, they were eager for content, and largely unable to discriminate image from original.

Matthew Wood described this time. “Bob’s moment in the sunlight of the astrological community ended, never to return, but he had found his life purpose in the ancient documents, and in isolation he began to perceive the kind of depths in them that can only be recognized through time and long exposure. Bob had always recommended that the early Greek texts be used with caution, within the context of their creation, and his perspicuity paid off. Whole doctrines and methods were illuminated as the years passed. Many a day I have seen Bob sitting in his chair contemplating a problem; rocking forward and back as if pumping fluids to his brain. Many people do not realize that Schmidt would spend hours, days, even years, contemplating a single problem. Ellen gave an example. ‘Bob wondered why Euclid used a certain verb instead of another.’ ‘Did he find out?’ I asked. ‘Yes; it took him six years.’ That is an example of the attention Bob applied to ancient Greek and which he brought to the astrological texts. Bob did not seek merely to understand the astrological system of ‘the Greek sages,’ as he called them; he wanted to be able to uncover the first principles behind each doctrine so that he could replicate it at will. He realized that only this level of attention would show beyond doubt that the primal core of the tradition had been reached.”

## **Vast, Solitary, and Mysterious Knowledge**

Having been cast aside by the tide of public opinion, Robert and Ellen stepped forward into a more solitary phase of research that in many ways allowed their focus to sharpen. With only a small handful of students now privy to their discoveries, Ellen and Robert together, following parallel lines of inquiry, discovered the originator of the system. And stunningly, that man was a mathematician and a contemporary of Plato, Eudoxus of Knidos. He was also



the select student of the Egyptian priests, fully initiated into their mysteries, and the “last of the Pythagoreans”- for, in his work, the aims of that school were at last fulfilled.

Eudoxus is known to have written treatises on the heavens, though his works are lost and do not survive except in summary. Schmidt laid out his main argument in a lecture he published in 2015, called “A Basic Course in Hellenistic Natal Astrology, Part Two: the Eudoxus Files.” In that lecture, he also published a portion of Ms. Black’s discoveries on the subject. Subsequent discoveries by Black, yet to be published, show that Plato himself testified to the identity of the true originator of astrology. Schmidt and Black even surmised the true identity of Hermes Trismegistus.

Even before 2000, for example in his lecture “Whither and Whence,” Robert pointed out that astrology could only have originated in the time period when *phasis* and *logos* were jointly used in Greek thought. Robert and Ellen both subsequently found evidence, both inside and outside the astrological canon, showing that this was true. This narrow period, essentially equivalent to the lifetimes of Plato and Aristotle, is the time frame in which Eudoxus flourished.

It is impossible to exaggerate the extent or importance of the knowledge Robert and Ellen acquired working in obscurity. Just as they were the originators of the first baby steps towards an understanding of Hellenistic - now Greek - astrology - in isolation they explored and mapped vast stretches of a “mysterious continent” that is still unknown to the general public.

With the inspiration of Euclid close to his heart, Schmidt was always trying to get back to first principles, to get all the way back to the “Definitions,” so to speak, so that the astrological system could be generated prospectively as well as viewed retrospectively. Just as Euclid’s tome all generates from a small set of definitions, postulates and common notions, Schmidt and Black wanted to find the ruling principles, the “archai,” of Eudoxus’ lost cosmology, and ultimately they achieved this. Schmidt’s later works include, *A Basic Course in Hellenistic Natal Astrology – Part 1-4* and *House System Discussion*.



Schmidt was working on “A Basic Course in Hellenistic Natal Astrology, Part 5” when he died in 2018. Black continued working on her research until her death in 2023. Ellen and Robert left their legacy in the custody of Kathryn and Ted Higson. Carrying Project Hindsight forward will include making Schmidt’s lectures available, reprinting out of print translations and commentary, and publishing as yet unpublished research. If you would like to learn more about this exciting project, or hear Schmidt’s lectures for yourself, visit [projecthindsight.net](http://projecthindsight.net) or [robertschmidtastrology.com](http://robertschmidtastrology.com). To get in touch with

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