

# The Essentials of Essential Dignities

by Stephanie Johnson



The astrological world is currently experiencing a second Renaissance - at least this is what seems to be reflected in astrological journals around the world. Around the world astrology seems to be accepted by a wider and wider section of the population. Perhaps it is only natural with the wondrous astronomical discoveries that are beamed into our homes via the television.

As a result, the astrological community is flourishing, unlike the early 18<sup>th</sup> century when astrology appeared to be in a decline. Certainly it is clear that as more and more people turn to astrology for answers, more and more of us are seeking to hone our skills, sharpen our minds and delve into the nitty-gritty of astrological interpretation and prediction.

While the psychological approach to astrology helps many grapple with the bigger issues facing the modern-day western world, it is the medieval approach which provides the straightest answers.

But where do we begin if we have indeed been seeped in psychological astrology which looks more at symbolism and the psyche than its does at hard facts?

It would be fair to say that the Essential Dignities are the building blocks of medieval and classical astrology and therefore an ideal starting point for gaining an insight into medieval astrology. This article is meant as a short introduction to the significance of the Essential Dignities of the Planets - Domicile, Exaltation, Triplicity, Term and Face. We hear the names bandied about, but do we really know what they are?

The aim of this article is not to give a complete understanding of the meaning and use of the Essential Dignities, but to act as an overture to the subject. Further reading can be found in the Bibliography at the end of the article.

Before we begin, and as we are going back to basics, it is important to note that this article will refer to the luminaries and the planets out to Saturn only. The outer planets Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto have not been included as they had not been discovered at the time when the system of Essential Dignities was in use.

To an ancient astrologer it was not enough to simply interpret the meaning of a planet in a particular sign (e.g. Venus in Libra is a love of harmony, an urge to relate to the world and others through beauty and the arts) as has become the modus operandi of many modern-day

astrologers. The ancient astrologer in many cases had to be accurate or lose their means of income at best, their lives at worst. As part of their astrology they had a weighting system to increase the accuracy of their interpretations, to determine the power of a planet in a certain sign and a certain degree. This weighting system was determined by points being allotted to Essential and Accidental Dignities and Debilities. Here we need to clarify what is meant by the terms “Dignities”, “Debilities”, “Essential” and “Accidental”.

Nicholas De Vore in his “*Encyclopaedia of Astrology*” states: “*Conditions of placement wherein a planet’s influence is strengthened, are termed Dignities; if weakened they are termed Debilities. These are of two varieties: Essential and Accidental. A planet in a Sign in which it is strengthened, is in one of its Essential Dignities; in a House in which it is strengthened, in its Accidental Dignity*”.

In other words a Planet is strengthened when in Dignity and weakened when in Debility.

For the purposes of this article we will look only at the **Essential Dignities**. As previously stated Essential Dignity is scored by points given for planets being in certain positions in the zodiac i.e. particular Signs or degrees of a Sign. The first Essential Dignity is **Domicile Rulership** or rulership by Sign as it is sometimes called by medieval astrologers.

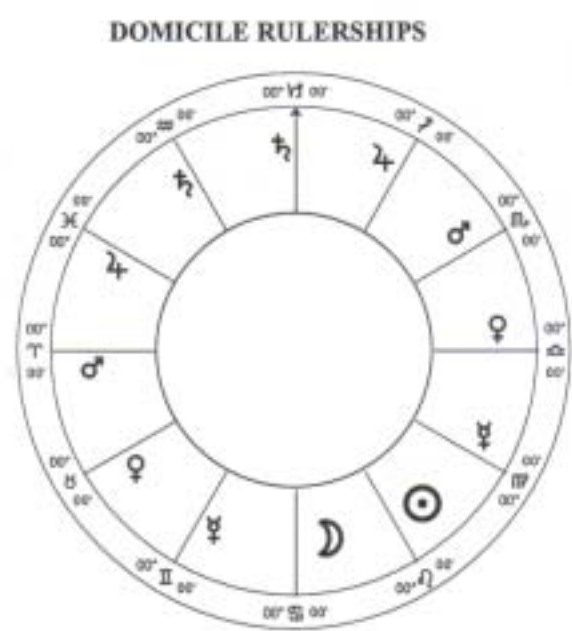
Whatever the name given by medieval astrologers, modern astrologers are familiar with the concept.

- Sun = Leo
- Moon = Cancer
- Mercury = Gemini/Virgo
- Venus = Taurus/Libra
- Mars = Aries/Scorpio
- Jupiter = Sagittarius/Pisces
- Saturn = Capricorn/ Aquarius

We can note here that the luminaries have one rulership only, while the planets are allotted two signs each. Here I have also included a diagram of the Domicile Rulerships - see **Chart 1**

Bonatti tells us that “*this is by reason of their (the luminaries) strengths. Many reason are able to be assigned for this, and especially as Albumasar says, the Sun and Moon are stronger and greater than the other fortunes.*”

Bonatti also gives us reasons why the Sun is linked with Leo and the choice of this rulership is very much linked to the northern hemisphere cycles.



*“One reason why only Leo... was assigned to the Sun as its house is that the Sun is the greater luminary, the diurnal luminary, and it is of light; and it is judged to be hot and dry. Its heat is intense and the virtue of its heat appears to be stronger when it is in Leo than when it is in any other sign; and the nature of the summer heat appears stronger than in other times. The Sun is a masculine, diurnal planet and it signifies heat and dryness by its nature. Leo is a masculine sign, fiery, hot and dry. When the Sun is in it, then we see the culmination of summer and the completion of the increase of heat. No other sign is so close to the nature of the Sun as Leo. Although Aries and Sagittarius are fiery signs, the heat of the Sun does not appear there so powerfully, nor is its light so clear nor so subtle as it is in Leo. Albumasar says that the Sun and Leo agrees in this, namely that the Sun is in the midst of the planets and Leo is in the midst of the summer heat, because that is when the greatest and strongest heat of summer occurs, when the Sun is in Leo.”*

Bonatti goes on to explain similar reasons for choosing the rulerships many of which relate to the northern hemisphere habitation, but also the aspects between the rulership signs play a key role. He also points out that there are many other theories for the choice of Domicile rulerships.

The sign Cancer has been assigned to the Moon because it is the first sign that agrees with the Moon in its feminine, nocturnal and cold/humid nature. However, Saturn, which was viewed as a dark and obscure planet, was assigned the northern hemisphere winter months of Capricorn and Aquarius - opposite the light-filled months of Leo and Cancer. The planet Jupiter was seen as a great benefic and therefore followed in the next signs Sagittarius and Pisces so as to alleviate the dark nature of Saturn. As Bonatti points out, the rulerships of Jupiter trine the rulerships of the luminaries. Whereas the signs Aries and Scorpio were assigned to Mars because they square the rulerships of the luminaries, thus reflecting Mars' evil and malevolent nature. Venus is linked with Taurus and Libra because these signs make sextile aspects to the luminaries, thus reflecting the lesser benefic nature of the planet Venus. The planet Mercury was seen to have a mixed nature, sometimes fortunate and sometime unfortunate. The signs Gemini and Virgo make no Ptolemaic aspect to the luminary signs.

While a Planet in its rulership Sign is considered to be in Dignity, the opposite is also true. A Planet in the sign opposing the Domicile Ruler is considered to be in Detriment. For instance the Sun is in Dignity in the sign of Leo, but is debilitated or in Detriment in the sign of Aquarius.

The Domicile rulers are considered to be the most powerful rulers of a sign, with the **Exaltations** next in line. These Exaltations are taken from Guido Bonatti's "Liber Astronomiae" in which he quotes his source as the ancient astrologers Albumasar and Alchabitius.

Sun = Aries (19<sup>th</sup> degree)

Moon = Taurus (3<sup>rd</sup> degree)

Mercury = Virgo (15<sup>th</sup> degree)

Venus = Pisces (27<sup>th</sup> degree)

Mars = Capricorn (28<sup>th</sup> degree)

Jupiter = Cancer (15<sup>th</sup> degree)

Saturn = Libra (21<sup>st</sup> degree)

Again we are faced with northern hemisphere reasons for choosing rulerships by Exaltation. The Sun is exalted in Aries because this is when it begins to ascend to the north, namely the zenith, and the day increases in length over the night.

Bonatti says, “certain ancients posited that Taurus was the Exaltation of the Moon because when the Sun is in Aries, which is its Exaltation, and the Moon is in Taurus, then there is the first appearance of the light of the (New) Moon.... They posited that Libra was the Exaltation of Saturn and Aries its descension because Saturn is opposed in nature and operation to the Sun; therefore their Exaltations are opposed to each other just as they are opposed to each other. They said the Cancer was the Exaltation of Jupiter because Jupiter by its nature signifies the north winds; and when Jupiter was in Cancer, the nourishing north winds arise, producing an increase in vegetables, and conforming to the nature of Jupiter. They said that Capricorn, because it is the opposite of Jupiter’s Exaltation, is its descension.”

The planet Mars was considered opposite in nature to Jupiter and therefore allotted the sign Capricorn. It was thought that the dry heat of Mars was strengthened when Mars in is Capricorn. The humid nature of Venus was said to agree with the nature of Pisces. The sign Virgo, as the descension of the sign Pisces, was linked with Mercury. “They posited Virgo as the Exaltation of Mercury because from him the dryness of the time of autumn increases and the nature of Mercury is referred to dryness, unless by accident. And when it is in Virgo, its dryness was strengthened,” says Bonatti.

A Planet in the opposite Sign to that in which it would be in Exaltation is said to be in its Fall and therefore in Debility.

Next we come to the third set of Dignities - the **Triplicities**. There are differing views on the Triplicity rulers. This article will refer to the Dorothean Triplicity rulerships, as purported by Dorotheus of Sidon. It is important to note; however, that Claudius Ptolemy (circa 140 AD) and William Lilly (17<sup>th</sup> Century) also have their own Triplicity rulerships.

In all of the systems each of the elements has Triplicity rulers. The Dorothean system allots three different rulers - a diurnal, nocturnal and participating ruler. Diurnal refers to belonging of the day i.e. the Sun above the horizon, nocturnal belonging of the night, and participating can apply to both.

As Lee Lehman states in her book “*Essential Dignities*”, “*Since the Greeks considered the equilateral triangle to be one of the most harmonious of all shapes, the trigons of elements if inscribed on a circle each produce an equilateral triangle.*”

The Dorothean Triplicities are:

<b>Signs</b>	<b>Diurnal</b>	<b>Nocturnal</b>	<b>Participating</b>
Fire	Sun	Jupiter	Saturn
Air	Saturn	Mercury	Jupiter
Water	Venus	Mars	Moon
Earth	Venus	Moon	Mars

The application of these Triplicity rulers varies, but generally speaking a Sun in Sagittarius

would be considered to have the Triplicity rulers of the Sun, Jupiter and Saturn, while a Sun in Taurus would have the Triplicity rulers of Venus, Moon and Mars.

The Triplicity rulers have been chosen according to the nature of the signs e.g. the Fire Triplicity rulers have been chosen because the diurnal nature of the fire signs is the same as the diurnal nature of the planets.

Here it is important to note that the diurnal planets are the Sun, Jupiter, and Saturn; and the nocturnal planets are the Moon, Mars and Venus. Mercury changes sect according to whether it rises before (diurnal) or after (nocturnal) the Sun.

As early astrologer Vettius Valens states, *“When we have ordered the zodiacal circle by difference and by property, we find two sects - a diurnal and a nocturnal sect of the Sun and of the Moon respectively. The Sun, being truly fiery, was associated Aries, Leo, Sagittarius, which was named its diurnal trigon (Triplicity) and is also fiery by nature. The Sun attached to himself Zeus (Jupiter) and Kronos (Saturn) as co-workers in his own sect and as guardians of what is accomplished by him - Zeus as the imitator and proxy of the king himself, the chooser of good things, the bestower of reputation and life; Kronos as the promoter of ills and oppositions and as the depriver of time. Of the trigon in question, then the Sun is master by day, the star of Zeus is master by proxy by night, while Kronos co-operates with both.”*

And so the other Triplicity rulers were chosen for similar reasons.

The planets are also said to have designated **Terms**. As US astrologer Lee Lehman states in her book *“Essential Dignities”*, *“the Terms are probably the most difficult of the Essential dignities to understand, because their origin seems the most arcane. The simple fact is that we may never know what they really are, but only that they were derived empirically. The question is, empirically from what? ... We don’t know.”*

What we do know is that there are three different Term systems - Ptolemaic, Chaldean and Egyptian.

Here I have included a table of the Egyptian Terms for information.

**Chart 2**

The final method for attributing virtue is that of **Face**, also known as Decan. Different astrologers use different methods of determining the Face of a Planet. According to Ptolemy, a planet in a house that is

**EGYPTIAN TERMS**

♄	♄ 6	♀ 6	♃ 8	♂ 5	♃ 5
♃	♀ 8	♃ 6	♄ 8	♃ 5	♂ 3
♂	♃ 6	♄ 6	♀ 5	♂ 7	♃ 6
♂	♂ 7	♀ 6	♃ 6	♄ 7	♃ 4
♂	♄ 6	♀ 5	♃ 7	♃ 6	♂ 6
♃	♃ 7	♀ 10	♄ 4	♂ 7	♃ 2
♃	♃ 6	♃ 8	♄ 7	♀ 7	♂ 2
♃	♂ 7	♀ 4	♃ 8	♄ 5	♃ 6
♂	♄ 12	♀ 5	♃ 4	♃ 5	♂ 4
♃	♃ 7	♄ 7	♀ 8	♃ 4	♂ 4
♃	♃ 7	♀ 6	♄ 7	♂ 5	♃ 5
♃	♀ 12	♄ 4	♃ 3	♂ 9	♃ 2

distant counter-clockwise from the Moon, or clockwise from the Sun by the same number of Houses as the Sign, is in its Face. Another ancient system gives a series of 10 degree Faces, similar to the system of Decanates. Astrologer Alan Leo employs a different system allotting 5 degree subdivisions of a Sign.

Again I have included a diagram of one system for information. **Chart 3**

Each rulership method mentioned above was considered to have varying degrees of power starting with the Domicile Ruler which was considered the most powerful of all. A planet in its Domicile rulership sign was considered to act more effectively, to be strengthened e.g. the action of Saturn was considered to be more powerful in Capricorn than in Sagittarius.

Planets in Exaltation are still powerful, but not as powerful as Planets in their Domicile Rulerships sign. As Lee Lehman states, planets in rulership are “*captains of their own fate*”, whereas Planets in Exaltation are “*more in a position of honoured guests*”. Lehman says that “*Planets in Triplicity are generally considered lucky. Good things happen not because you necessarily excel at them, but because you stumble upon a good result.*”

A Planet in Term will not necessarily signify good fortune, but it will signify something of import - the outcome is not certain.

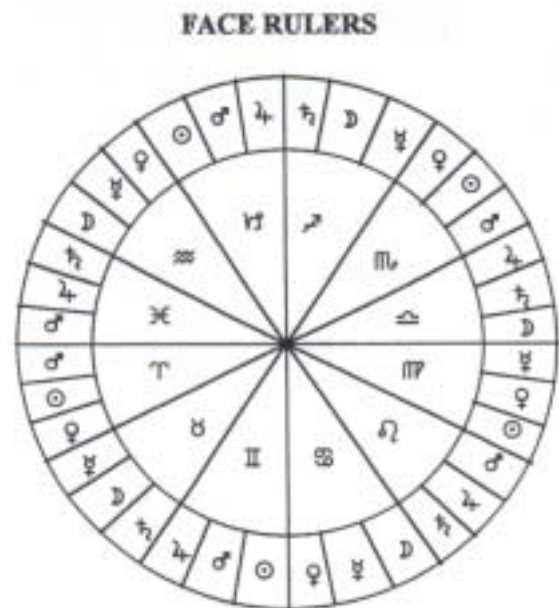
“*The Face represents worry or concern about the planet in question; it is somewhat tenuous that the Face should even be considered dignified*”, according to Lehman.

The most common system of weighting a planet in a sign was the allotment of five virtues or points to a Planet in Domicile Rulership, four virtues to a Planet in Exaltation, three virtues to a Planet in Triplicity, two virtues to a Planet in Term and one virtue to a Planet in Face.

Using this method the strength or weakness of a planet can be determined. The more points or the more Dignities, the more strength or power is allotted to a planet.

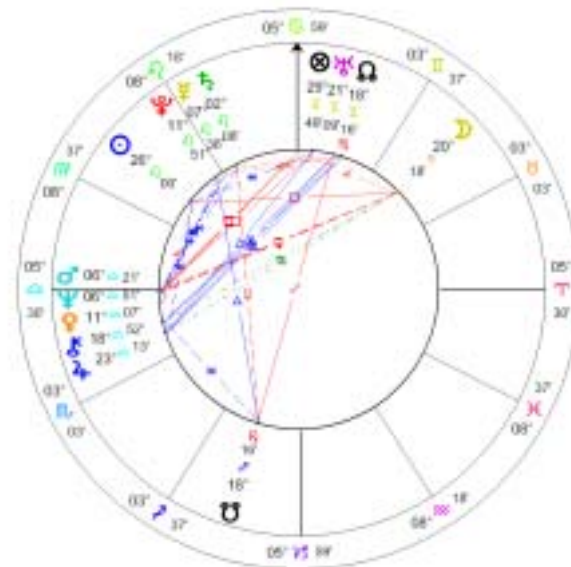
As 16<sup>th</sup> century French astrologer and physician Claude Dariot states, “*The ancient astronomers have found out and tried by experience, that the planets do show and utter their force and strength much more in certain places of the Zodiac than in others and therefore are said to be more strong and better fortunated in those places than in others....*”

Let’s take US President Bill Clinton’s Sun sign as an example. We see from **Chart 4** that Bill was born on August 19, 1946 at Hope, Arkansas 33N40 01 093W35 29 + 6. The Data Source is from Clinton’s mother, Virginia Kelly, to Shelley Ackerman. The reference is the Clifford Chart Compendium by UK Astrologer Frank C Clifford RR:A. Mr Clinton’s Sun is at 26Leo00. His Sun scores 5 points for being in its Domicile Rulership; 0 points for Exaltation; 3 points



for being in its fiery Triplicity rulership; and 0 points for Term or Face rulership. A total of 8 points. This is a dignified and powerful Sun strengthened by its Essential Dignities. His Moon at 20Taurus19 scores 0 points for Domicile Rulership; 4 points for Exaltation; 0 points for Triplicity, Term or Face; a total of 4 points. His Moon has Dignity, but not as much Dignity as his Sun. With a strong Sun in the 11<sup>th</sup> House, we therefore see Bill Clinton as someone who shines when he is amongst his friends and groups of people. His strengths are noticed by others. Mr Clinton has the ability to be a strong leader of groups and may achieve striking success. We could also notice the sextile to the benefic angular Jupiter which indicates the likelihood of a rise to prominence. His dignified Moon ruling the 10<sup>th</sup> House also points to success in a public, rather than private, arena. He is particularly going to be noted for his handling of resources (8<sup>th</sup> House) and his joint projects with women (Moon in the 8<sup>th</sup> House). Fortunately his Moon is dignified by exaltation so his handling of joint resources should augur well for him.

Bill Clinton  
 Natal Chart (E)  
 01/01/1946  
 01/01/1946  
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 01/01/1946  
 01/01/1946  
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 01/01/1946



It is also possible to use the Essential Dignities in other ways such as ancient techniques for using many of the Dignities for scoring rulers of particular areas of life, or using only the Triplicity Rulers in predictive work. The combination and possible effects are numerous; however, this system goes a long way to given an astrologer an understanding of the true nature and Essential properties of a Planet. Modern-day astrologers can use these ancient tools to recapture some of the intricacies and a system of rulerships which has by and large been lost in the western astrological world until recent renewal of interest.

In conclusion it should now be possible to view Essential Dignity tables with some insight and understanding. It is not the aim of this article to provide an in depth analysis of how to use the Essential Dignities in the chart, but rather an introduction to their origin so that some understanding can be gained. Perhaps this will also act as an enticement to delve into the subject of medieval astrology further.

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