

The burning question: how combustion works in a natal chart

Three states within a few degrees of the Sun, routinely conflated, with opposite meanings.

Few conditions in traditional astrology are as consequential as a planet's proximity to the Sun, and few are as carelessly read. Within about seventeen degrees of arc lie three distinct states, two of them severely debilitating and one of them the strongest accidental dignity the tradition recognises.

They are frequently treated as one. They are not.

The three states

STATE	DISTANCE FROM THE SUN	EFFECT
Under the beams	within about 15°	weakened; the planet acts, but is not seen
Combust	within about 8°30'	severely weakened; the planet is overwhelmed
Cazimi	within 17' of arc	greatly strengthened

The figures vary somewhat between authors, and a few give the orbs by planet rather than as a fixed number. What does not vary is the structure: a wide zone of diminishment, a narrow zone of severe diminishment inside it, and at the exact centre a reversal.

What the doctrine is actually about

Visibility. The whole of it follows from a single physical fact, and holding on to that fact keeps the interpretation honest.

A planet more than about fifteen degrees from the Sun can be seen rising before it or setting after it. Closer than that, it is lost in the twilight. Closer still, it is in the glare itself. And at the very centre of the disc it is — in the tradition's image — no longer drowned but enthroned: *in corde solis*, in the heart of the Sun.

The Sun signifies, among other things, the king. A planet at a distance is a subject going about its business. A planet under the beams is a subject standing too near the throne to be noticed as anything but part of the court. A planet combust has been absorbed into the king's presence entirely. A planet cazimi is seated on the throne with him.

What each state means in a nativity

Under the beams

The mildest of the three and the most often over-read. The planet retains its capacity; what it loses is visibility. Whatever it signifies operates without being recognised — talents exercised without credit, work that is done and not seen, a quality the native has and is not known for.

It is a real debility and a modest one. A planet under the beams in an angular house, with dignity, is a functional planet.

Combust

Severe. The tradition's language is consistent and strong: the planet is burnt, consumed, overcome. What it signifies is not absent — it is overridden by something larger.

The practical reading depends on what the combust planet rules. A combust ruler of the ascendant describes someone whose own purposes are habitually subordinated to another's. A combust ruler of the second describes resources that are consumed as fast as they arrive. The state describes *how*; the rulerships describe *what*.

Two things modify it. A planet in its own sign or exaltation resists combustion considerably better — the tradition says such a planet is in its own house and the fire cannot take it. And reception between the planet and the Sun changes the picture: what is received is not destroyed.

Cazimi

Within seventeen minutes of arc, the reading reverses entirely. The planet is not overwhelmed but elevated; the older authors rank it above any essential dignity.

The rarity is worth stating. Seventeen minutes is about a third of a degree. In a random chart the chance of finding a planet cazimi is very small, and a great many claimed instances are simply close conjunctions read generously. If the orb is stated in degrees rather than minutes, it is not cazimi.

Where it does occur, it describes something singular: the matter the planet signifies is central to the life, and is exercised with unusual authority.

The practical difficulties

Mercury and Venus are the common cases

Mercury never exceeds about 28° of elongation from the Sun, Venus about 47°. Mercury is therefore under the beams in a large fraction of all charts and combust in a substantial minority.

This matters for interpretation. A condition that affects a great many people cannot, by itself, carry a dramatic reading. A combust Mercury is common; it should be reported soberly and weighed against everything else, not announced.

Oriental and occidental

A planet emerging from the Sun's rays into the morning sky is in a different case from one sinking into them in the evening. The first is coming out of combustion, the second going into it. The distinction is meaningful in the tradition and is lost entirely if only the distance is measured.

Longitude alone is not enough

Combustion is a phenomenon of visibility, and visibility depends on latitude as well as longitude. A planet several degrees north or south of the ecliptic may be visible at an elongation where a planet on the ecliptic would not be. Most software measures longitude only. The stricter authors take latitude into account, and where a judgement turns on the distinction, it is worth the extra calculation.

A note on proportion

Combustion is an *accidental* debility — a matter of circumstance, not of nature. It belongs with retrogradation, cadency and besiegement, and it is weighed against essential dignity, not instead of it.

A dignified planet combust is a capable planet in difficult circumstances. A peregrine planet combust in a cadent house is something else. The difference between those two readings is the difference between a judgement and a verdict, and the older material is careful about it in a way that summaries of it rarely are.

On the orbs. The figures given here are the common medieval values. Some authors set combustion at 8°30', others at 8° or a round 10°; a few assign different orbs to each planet on the ground that the planets differ in brightness. The seventeen-minute figure for cazimi is stable across the sources and is one of the more exact numbers the tradition hands down.

On terminology. The three states are distinct in the Arabic and Latin sources and were already being conflated by the seventeenth century. Where a text speaks only of a planet being "in the Sun's rays", the intended state usually has to be inferred from the orb the author states elsewhere.

academyofastrology.org — free to download and free to use in teaching.

Combustion is weighed against essential dignity, not instead of it, and this article gives no table of it. Your Astral Life publishes one: five dignities and two debilities, sign by sign and degree by degree, with the scale and the almuten of each degree, day chart and night chart apart. www.yourastrallife.com/en/dignities