

# Divination Practices: Palmistry—Part One

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## Introduction

Palmistry is the occult practice of predicting the future by the details of the hand, including size, shape, lines, nails, and other features. As one standard text asserts, “It is the purpose of Palmistry to teach you how to conquer the ancient art of divination....”<sup>1</sup> It is also commonly used in character analysis. Although its origins are uncertain, it has been practiced in most cultures throughout history. In earlier eras it was often known as chiromancy and contained certain subdivisions, such as onychomancy or divination by the fingernails.

Like many other forms of divination, palmistry has popular entertainment value, which often becomes the means of fostering further interest. “Palmistry has always had an unflinching amusement value,”<sup>2</sup> and “Palmistry can be used as a pleasant party pastime—a way to get yourself stage center and also to contribute to others’ enjoyment.... Perhaps the easiest way to establish intimacy with another—and to find out if you really want to know him (her) better—is to say: ‘let me look at your hand.’”<sup>3</sup>

A number of claims are made for palmistry, almost all of which are false. For example, palmistry claims to be 1) a true science, 2) highly accurate in its psychological diagnosis or prediction of the future, 3) not an occult practice or superstitious, and 4) that “responsible” palmistry is not fatalistic and does not unequivocally predict such things as serious illness, accident, or death. Consider the following illustrations.

In *Medical Palmistry* we read that palmistry deals with science, not occultism: “Unlike those occult arts, modern palmistry is predicated upon a set of criteria as rigid as any in physics. Its claims can be verified or disproved by any unbiased person who cares to investigate them upon an empirical basis.”<sup>4</sup> As far back as 1897, one of the leading texts claimed that palmistry “is fast leaving the ranks of *Occult Sciences* to enter the honored family of *Sciences*....”<sup>5</sup> We are also told that palmistry is not fatalistic: “Even amateur palmists often discover signs of pending changes, good or bad, in their health, fortunes or careers,”<sup>6</sup> but “there is no absolute fatality shown in the hands.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite these claims, we will show that palmistry is not a science but an occult practice. Its overall accuracy is no better than for other forms of divination, and many proponents do continue to predict “inevitable” disease or death for their clients. Of course, they also tell clients how to *avoid* their “fate”—usually for a price commensurate to the gravity of the problem.

The closest conceivable relationship palmistry bears to science is the discipline of dermatoglyphics, which is “the study of the patterns of parallel ridges and furrows on the epidermis of the hands and feet” e.g., fingerprints. Besides fingerprinting, this field of study has discovered genetic correlations between certain dermatoglyphic features and particular human diseases, such as Ellis-van Creveld Syndrome, and Rubenstein-Taybi Syndrome, dealing with anomalies of the hands, dwarfism/polydactyly, and broad thumbs and great toes. Down’s syndrome may also be included.<sup>8</sup> “Only with some semantic effort can any of these recognized correlations be construed as resembling those of the palmist,” and “the scientifically established connections between palmar and digital features and other aspects of individual biology offer no positive evidence in support of the relationships advo-

cated by the palmist.”<sup>9</sup>

Of course, in some cases human hands can give evidence of one’s occupation (e.g., as a laborer) or habits (e.g., smoking), and thus reveal possible clues to the owner’s interests and perhaps even temperament or personality. But such information is limited and far removed from the amount of information palmists allege they can give through their method.

Like all divination, the success of palmistry is due more to the *perception* that it addresses client’s needs, rather than to an actual ability to predict the future or analyze a person’s character consistently. In other words, practitioners claim to be able to successfully regulate people’s present and future life to their benefit. They tell people what they want to hear about themselves or their future. This is a talent especially true of popular and charlatan palmists. As one text advises, “Always end on an encouraging note, everyone has something to develop and some good fortune coming their way—stress this.”<sup>10</sup> Another text states, “Most people today are interested in love, money, success, travel—and care less about health and life expectancy than they used to when life was more precarious. As a beginner, it is wise to confine your reading to the four high-interest areas rather than to foretell disasters, which take some experience to define.”<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, palmistry has become part of modern culture because most palmists have become adept at flattering their clients by stressing positive virtues and speaking of sadness or tragedy as being experienced only in the past. Who wouldn’t like to have their future revealed as successful and happy?<sup>12</sup> Palmistry claims that it can help people with choices in vocation, decisions regarding a marriage partner or dating, raising children, medical diagnosis, business opportunities, and virtually any area in need of advice or counsel. But, as noted, palmists will also reveal the unspoken dangers facing a client in the future, even disasters which the client can discover how to avoid for a fee.

## **Nature**

Palmistry is at least 3000 years old and may have originated in India. The basic theory is that every detail of the hand (not just the palms) has information about the individual’s present or future. Included are the hand shape and size, palm configurations and topography, finger shape, size, and configurations, and even features of the fingernails. There are at least a hundred signs, marks, or relationships through which supposed influences, events, or qualities can be “recognized” by the palmist. Depending on the part of the hand studied, palmistry may be divided into three lesser occult methods: 1) chiromy (the outward shape of the hand), 2) chirosophy (manual formations), and 3) chiromancy (the form of the hand and fingers and its lines and markings<sup>13</sup>). A related category, solistry, involves reading the foot.

There are also different emphases in palmistry. A palmist may stress one or more of the following: 1) “medical” palmistry, in which a correlation is sought between the hands and physical (or emotional) states; 2) psychotherapeutic palmistry in which a correlation is sought between the hands, character, and personality, pointing out positive and negative aspects, and 3) the attempted correlation between the hands and the client’s past, present and future. This last category is sometimes termed divinatory palmistry, although the label “divination” properly applies to all categories.

Palmistry has much in common with other forms of divination, especially astrology. As in astrology, the amount of information that can be “read” from the hand is vast. In terms of

major and minor features, the hand has as many or more determinants as the astrologer's chart.

According to palmistry, the left hand allegedly reveals one's destiny and inherited disposition, while the right hand reflects how one's will and environment have modified the person's destiny or fate. (Left-handed persons reverse this rule.) Because the palm is believed to paint a miniature picture of the person and her future (or even her supposed past lives), the hand must be examined in minute detail.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the hand as a whole is evaluated for the features of the handshake, color, skin texture, flexibility, shape, size, and "type." There are five or six major "types" of hands (square, conic, pointed, spatulate, mixed), although some systems have as many as 14.<sup>15</sup> The fingers and thumb are evaluated for relative spread and size to one another (and to the palm), length, flexibility, smoothness, curvature, shape, and coloration. The fingernails are also evaluated for length, shape, moons, and so on.

The lines of the palms are divided into major and minor categories. There are at least 14 major lines including the lifeline and those of the head, heart, health, fortune, fate, intuition, spirituality, marriage, and children. The lines are also evaluated according to size, shape, relationships between them, and other factors. (Certain lines are found only in some people.) For example, the lifeline deals with one's overall constitution, length of life, or the destiny and dates of outstanding events; the headline deals with intellectual capacities, and the heart line deals with the emotions. Among the minor lines, the Girdle of Venus deals with the passions, the Martian line deals with military glory or personal triumph, and the Mercury line deals with the person's overall well-being.

Just below the fingers on the palms are the "mounts," the fleshly area where the fingers join the palm. These are correlated to astrological planets, e.g., Venus, Jupiter, Saturn, sun (or Uranus), Mercury, moon. There are also tiny line configurations of the palm often found at the top, base, or along the palm lines. These are called series, grills, circles, points, islands, crosses, stars, squares, and triangles. Each of these features is said to represent certain personal characteristics of one's past or future.

The manner in which a person holds his fingers is also thought to be relevant. For example, a space between the first and second finger means the person thinks for himself. If the little finger curves slightly inward toward the sun or ring finger, one supposedly has a shrewd business brain. The larger the thumb, the stronger the self-control and moral force. Small thumbs indicate a weak, impressionable nature. A well-developed Saturn mount indicates a serious, introspective, brooding, reserved type. A grill (like the pound sign on your telephone) on the mount of Mercury (the small finger) reveals cunning or dishonesty. The thumb bent out and backward is "the killer's thumb" and indicates the danger of brutality.<sup>16</sup> That all this is nonsense for any credible determination of character or future events is proven by the history of palmistry itself, not to mention that of divination in general.

As in all divination, some predictions will be found to be true but this only indicates a number of random hits. But when spiritism enters the picture, amazing predictions sometimes occur. Anyone who examines their own characteristics based on what palmistry claims will discover its lack of credibility.

In the next article we will present our critique of palmistry.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Comte C. de Saint-Germain, *The Practice of Palmistry* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1977, rpt. of 1897 edition), p. 18.
- <sup>2</sup> Mary Anderson, *Palmistry* (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, England: Aquarian Press, 1977), p. 7.
- <sup>3</sup> Joyce Wilson, *The Complete Book of Palmistry* (New York: Bantam, 1978), p. 9.
- <sup>4</sup> Martin Steinbach, *Medical Palmistry: Health and Character in the Hands* (Secaucus, NJ: University Books, 1975), p. IX.
- <sup>5</sup> Saint-Germain, *The Practice of Palmistry*, p. 10; cf. p. 379.
- <sup>6</sup> Steinbach, *Medical Palmistry*, p. X.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- <sup>8</sup> Michael Alan Park, "Palmistry: Science or Hand-Jive?" *The Skeptical Inquirer*, Winter 1982-83, vol. 7, no. 2., pp. 29-30.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 31.
- <sup>10</sup> Anderson, *Palmistry*, p. 12.
- <sup>11</sup> Wilson, *The Complete Book of Palmistry*, p. 17.
- <sup>12</sup> Richard Cavendish, ed., *Man, Myth and Magic: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Supernatural* (New York: Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 1970), p. 2118.
- <sup>13</sup> Leslie Shepard, comp.-ed., *The Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1979, rev.), p. 685; Saint-Germain, *The Practice of Palmistry*, p. 379.
- <sup>14</sup> Cavendish, *Man, Myth and Magic*, p. 2119; Anderson, *Palmistry*, pp. 17-48.
- <sup>15</sup> Saint-Germain, *The Practice of Palmistry*, p. 56.
- <sup>16</sup> Cf. Anderson, *Palmistry*, pp. 17-48.