Hipparchus — had survived. But after the Almagest became available, Hipparchus's works lost their value, and most of them vanished. In their absence, the Almagest was without peer, a daunting legacy to the Arabic and Latin civilizations of the Middle Ages, whose astronomers were in awe of their towering predecessor.

When we come to study the earliest Greek attempts to make sense of the universe, we find that our sources are fragmentary in the extreme. What little we have owes much to the custom of Aristotle (384–322 BC), of citing his predecessors before demolishing them. It seems that alongside the mythologies inherited from earlier times, there gradually emerged a speculative interest in the natural world, which led to efforts to make sense of nature — rather than to attempts to answer quantitative questions, such as those posed by the columns of numbers on the Babylonian tablets. But what we would recognize as a mature, predictive science of astronomy was to develop only in the Hellenistic era, when these two approaches, the Greek and the Babylonian, merged.

ASTRONOMY IN BABYLON

The city of Babylon lay on the left bank of the Euphrates river, some 70 miles south of modern Baghdad. During what is known as the Old Babylonian period (possibly 1830–1531 BC), the city was ruled by the dynasty of Hammurabi. Babylon then fell to the Hittites, but was soon incorporated into the Cassite empire, after which followed a long period of Assyrian domination. This ended with the destruction of Nineveh and its great library in 612 BC. After a period of independence, Babylon came under Persian rule; but in 331 BC the city was conquered by the army of Alexander the Great, and thereafter the cultures of Babylon and Greece were in direct contact.

A record of the earliest astronomical observations in Mesopotamia that have come down to us, the appearances and disappearances of Venus in the reign of King Ammisaduqa, of the Hammurabi dynasty. This tablet lists these events according to the lunar calendar then in use. Modern computations of the behaviour of Venus in the second quarter of the second millennium BC have been compared with the data on this and similar tablets in order to determine the years 'before Christ' of Ammisaduqa's reign, and hence of the Hammurabi dynasty.