

Medieval Astrology: Figures, Contributions, Outlooks

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This article is based on a symposium talk I gave at the February 2010 NCGR conference. It introduces the figures, contributions, and outlooks in medieval astrology, which was largely practiced by Arabic and Latin speakers between about 750-1300 AD. But in order to understand this period, we must first go back several centuries to the Sassanian Persian empire.

1. History and Figures

The Sassanian Persian empire began in 226 AD, and flourished until 651 when it was finally conquered by Muslim armies and the royal dynasty ended. The Persian court had welcomed philosophers and astrologers from the start, and embraced the philosophical and astrological refugees from the West when the Byzantine Emperor Justinian closed the pagan philosophical schools in 529-31. Influxes of astrologers from the West coincided with translation projects and revisions to texts in the East, but there were also indigenous patterns and trends of astrological contribution and practice.

After the Muslim invasions much Persian (or Pahlavi) astrological literature was destroyed. However, as late as the mid-700s several chief texts survived. For example, there were very early Pahlavi and Greek editions of the *Anthology* of Vettius Valens, the *Carmen* of Dorotheus, works of Ptolemy and Rhetorius, and others, along with commentaries. There were also other, uncertain works in Greek and probably Pahlavi which appeared later under different forms in Arabic, deriving from places such as the Hermetic and astro-theological area of Harran. This general trend of compiling and drawing on Greek and other sources in particular, is virtually summed up in the so-called *Book of Aristotle* by Māshā'allāh. It was written in Arabic in the mid-to-late 700s, and synthesizes material from Valens, Dorotheus, Ptolemy, Rhetorius, perhaps Paul of Alexandria, a work in Pahlavi but originally by a "Hermes" in Greek, as well as commentary deriving from the Persians al-Andarzaghār, Buzurjmīhr, and Zaradusht.

Because of the destruction of sources, we do not know much about the Persian astrologers. But the three just mentioned do stand out. Buzurjmīhr was perhaps a 6th Century minister to Sassanian ruler Khusrau I, but Pingree believes he was really a Burjmīhr (of the same period), who introduced chess into Iran from India.¹ Zaradusht ("Zoroaster") lived sometime before 600 AD, and wrote a *Book of Nativities* in Old Persian (along with several others), drawing on Greek material. His work on nativities is the oldest Arabic translation of a Pahlavi astrological work we have. Finally, there is the curious figure of Zādānfarrūkh al-Andarzaghār, whose dates are unknown but whose influence was wide. His work seems to have been responsible for passing on the majority of the Sassanian annual predictive system, as found in the *Book of Aristotle* Book IV, and Abū Ma'shar's *On the Revolutions of Nativities*, both recently translated and published by me. He is quoted liberally in places by astrologers such as al-Qabīsī and Bonatti, but his work seems to survive only in fragments, and even then only through the reports of others. However, three charts in 'Umar al-Tabarī's *Three Books of Nativities* can be dated to between 614 and 642 (near the end of the Sassanian

¹ Pingree 1989 p. 231.

period): since these charts illustrate the annual techniques it is very tempting to suppose that al-Andarzaghār flourished in these last decades of the Sassanian empire.

From here our story of medieval astrology passes over to the new Arab Muslim rulers. Our medieval period “officially” begins around 750 AD, with the founding of the ‘Abbasid dynasty in Harran—the place of Hermetic magic and star worship. Caliph al-Mansūr (r. 754-775) took advantage of Persian astrological expertise by hiring several Persians and one Indian to draw up an election chart to found the city of Baghdad (which was duly done in 762). Just as al-Mansūr hired Persians to do his astrology, he and his circle supported research projects in all sciences, hiring translators and scholars from the places they conquered, in addition to the Arab practice of hiring Persian administrators to help run the empire.

Thus it was in the mid-to-late 700s that key Persian figures began writing and translating into Arabic for the first time. Works by the Persian Jews Māshā’allāh and Sahl bin Bishr were among the earliest, along with those of Māshā’allāh’s colleague ‘Umar al-Tabarī, and the Christian Theophilus (to whom we owe much of our war horary material). These Persians dominated the scene for many decades, until Arabs and others began to take over, especially at the “compendium” stage of writing; the Arab scholar al-Kindī (the teacher of Abū Ma’shar) was one such 9th Century writer. This fruitful period lasted for only about two centuries, when the Persians ceased to dominate. But other notables in this period include Māshā’allāh’s student Abū ‘Ali al-Khayyāt, al-Qabīsī, Thābit bin Qurra, and a later compiler known as ‘Ali al-Rijāl (often called Haly Abenragel).

In the meantime, the Greek-speaking eastern Byzantine empire had had something of an astrological tradition, but for some centuries it remained isolated from western Europe and Perso-Arabic developments. Its works are still rather unknown today. One notable event was the transmission of the works of Theophilus (and associated Perso-Arabic teachings) to Constantinople in the 700s by a man named Stephanus the Philosopher. Immediately, emperors had to have their own court astrologers and military advisors. Another cache of materials arrived in the 11th Century, and the compiler Demophilus is one such notable name from that later period.

Partly because of economic, educational, linguistic, and political differences, the Latin West remained excluded from much of the goings-on in the Byzantine East. But in the 12th Century the Latins had their own opportunity to pick up on astrology when translators in northern Spain began to work on astrological, magical, Hermetic, mathematical, and philosophical works in Arabic. For example, in Toledo worked the famous John of Spain (or John of Seville) and Gerard of Cremona. In Tarazona and Zaragoza (or Saragossa) there was an important circle of translators such as Hermann of Carinthia, Robert of Ketton, and Hugo of Santalla. (Incidentally, Hugo was the first to translate the so-called Emerald Tablet of Hermes into Latin). In the 13th Century universities and courts, astrology became widely known and used by elites, such as the Italian military leader Guido da Montefeltro and the tyrant Ezzelino III. It was commented and theorized upon by academics like St. Thomas Aquinas and his teacher, St. Albert the Great. And for the next few centuries, astrology became a mainstay of university courses, especially in the faculties of medicine. A few notable figures in this period are the Italian astrologer Guido Bonatti (13th Century), an advisor to Emperor Frederick II named Michael Scot (12th-13th Centuries), and Campanus (13th Century), who devised a house system used today.

Below I have listed what I consider to be the defining works of this period, but it is important to know that not all were equally well-known—and this has affected the trajectory of medieval astrology. Some were not known because of their date of translation or

distribution. For example, works below by Abū Ma‘shar and al-Rijāl were made available in the 13th Century, but either too late or in too-small portions for Bonatti to show much exposure to them. This is important because Bonatti’s work was in some ways definitive for many later European astrologers. On the other hand, some were neglected because of the irritating style of their Latin: one key example is Māshā’allāh’s *Book of Aristotle*. This book would have transmitted huge amounts of Hellenistic teachings, but after it was translated into rather stilted Latin by Hugo of Santalla in about 1141, it was immediately neglected and forgotten—a fate which did not befall the works of the reader-friendly John of Spain. This *Book of Aristotle* was saved from destruction by being in the library of the Elizabethan magician John Dee, but it was still ignored until the 1970s. David Pingree and Charles Burnett produced a Latin critical edition in the 1990s, and I myself translated it into English in 2009 as part of my *Persian Nativities I*. Medieval astrology might have turned out much differently if not for these issues.

Following is a rather solid list of definitive medieval texts, all of which were translated into Latin:

- Māshā’allāh: *Book of Aristotle, On Reception*
- Sahl: a collection of five works (*Introduction, 50 Judgments, On Questions, On Elections, On Times*)
- ‘Umar al-Tabarī: *Three Books of Nativities*
- Persian compilation: *The Book of the Nine Judges* (horary)
- Al-Kindī: *The 40 Chapters* (elections)
- Al-Qabīsī: *The Introduction to Astrology* (basic concepts)
- Abū Ma‘shar: *Great Introduction* (philosophy and concepts), *On the Great Conjunctions* (mundane)
- Al-Rijāl: *On the Judgments of the Stars* (all branches)
- Bonatti: *Book of Astronomy* (all branches)

I have translated many of these into English, and will release *The Book of the Nine Judges* in 2010.

2. Technical Contributions

This period’s contributions (primarily by the Persians) were significant, and all of them were really definitive for the branches of astrology as they were later understood in the West.

First, it seems that full-blown horary methods (as we know them today) were developed, probably on a divinational model of astrology. This material includes a notable contribution from Theophilus of Edessa, who may have gotten some of his material from the Indians when he was attached to Muslim rulers in the Far East.

Second, the Persians (with some Indian ingredients) developed mundane astrological methods, including annual and monthly ingress charts, mundane profections and Lots, mundane periods based on the planets (*fīrdārīyyah*), and an astrological theory of history based primarily on Saturn-Jupiter conjunctions and those of Saturn-Mars in Cancer. Early modern astrologers in the 16th-17th Centuries spent much time using these methods to understand the political tumult around them.

Third, there was a continuation of magical techniques such as astrological talismans, but not much is known about this in the strictly astrological texts.

Fourth, this period saw the rise of numerous quadrant-based house systems using intermediary cusps (e.g., Porphyry, Alchabitius Semi-Arc, later Regiomontanus and Placidus) instead of the older whole-sign house system (in which each sign is identified with a house). It is difficult to find clear and consistent references to quadrant houses in the early Perso-Arabic material, but certainly there were discussions about them, and these systems exploded in the 9th Century just when the Arabs were learning the mathematics to create them. Proponents of quadrant-based houses will consider this a contribution; the opposite is true for those who use whole-sign houses.

Fifth, there was a great expansion of medical astrology and techniques for determining temperament and bodily shape. These methods can be found in William Lilly's *Christian Astrology* (17th Century), though he himself got them from earlier writers whose works are still only in Latin.

Finally, there is a dubious contribution whose origin has only recently become clearer: the so-called *mubtazz* or "almuten." By itself, this word simply means the "winner," and refers to some planet which takes precedence over other candidates when determining some topic in a chart. Finding such a chief planet was recommended by Greek writers in various contexts, but in the Arabic period a weighting system was used, such that different types of rulers for a given topic or place received different numbers of points. Thus the domicile ruler of some point received 5 points, the exalted ruler 4, the primary triplicity ruler 3, the bound (or term) ruler 2, and the decan or face ruler 1: the one with the most points was the *mubtazz* and the planet to focus on.

Until recently the origin of this approach was obscure. It is not found in the numerous works of Sahl and Māshā'allāh, for instance. But already in the 9th Century work of al-Kindī it is straightforwardly recommended. What happened between approximately the 790s and the 850s? The best answer so far comes from the 9th Century Persian physician and astrologer Abū Bakr, in his book *On Nativities* (recently published by me in *Persian Nativities II*). In the material on parents (which is where Ptolemy describes his own *mubtazz* theory), Abū Bakr tells two stories about a then-famous poet and astrologer, Abū al-'Anbas al-Saimari (ca. 828-888). First he tells how al-'Anbas helped him out with a client's chart, establishing al-'Anbas as a mentor or teacher. Later, Abū Bakr mentions in passing that al-'Anbas "said that he had found the *mubtazz* [of parents] according to what 'Umar said, by giving 5 dignities to the Lord of the domicile..." and so on. In other words, Abū Bakr's own mentor, or those around him, devised the weighted *mubtazz* specifically in response to a single passage in 'Umar. Nor however does Abū Bakr even endorse this approach, which indicates it was not generally accepted at that time. Thus we can tentatively date the invention of the weighted *mubtazz* to sometime between about 800 and 840, by al-'Anbas, a mentor of Abū Bakr, who at the time held a minority viewpoint. By the time of European astrologers such as Johannes Schoener and William Lilly, this weighted approach was extended to numerous topics, such that one cannot really do anything in Schoener's astrology without calculating a weighted *mubtazz* created of various Lots, cusps, planets, and so on. Critics of the weighted *mubtazz* can argue that this way of assigning points ignores differences in planetary conditions and rulerships. The identification of the probable inventor adds weight to the charge of artificiality.

3. Philosophy

Finally, let us look at the philosophical standpoint of these astrologers. Here I will summarize the attitudes of several schools of thought, but note that not every astrologer can be placed neatly into these categories.

First of all, the medievals emphasized what I call the Ptolemaic-Aristotelian attitude: the planets *cause* things to happen, they are causal agents. Therefore, astrology is virtually a branch of physics. Modern astrologers who adopt terms in physics such as particles, waves, fields of force, and so on, belong firmly in this camp. This view also allows for normal human freedom and choice as conventionally understood: the planets may only show causal trends, for instance, but these can be overridden.

The second school of thought was the Stoic. This view says that the planets do not cause things, but they *signify* things. Thus astrology is a science of interpretation and is divinational. The Stoics also believed that everything is causally determined, so that what the stars signify will in fact happen (even if perhaps they only indicate *types* of things which will happen, and not every detail). This school denied conventional notions of freedom and was not well emphasized in the medieval attitude, but lurks in the background.

The third attitude was the magical one, which derives from Platonism, Hermeticism and other sympathetic views. It does not appear very much in the how-to textbooks, but was the province of magicians and talisman-makers.

The fourth was a new religious attitude: that is, the introduction of the notion of an indeterminate free will which is liberated from the forces of necessity on earth, and which can radically self-create and change one's direction in life. It is a human mirror image of God's radically free will, but in a weakened form. This theory was invented around the 1st and 2nd Centuries, largely by Jewish and Christian theologians, and astrology had to be reappraised in light of it.

By the 13th Century, Islamic and Christian thinkers had developed a compromise view which blended radically free will with Ptolemaic-Aristotelian trends. Roughly put, it made the following claims. (1) Astrology fulfills the definition of a science, using experience and reason, with deductions from axioms and so on, in order to explain things. And because its objects of study (the planets) are among the qualitatively highest in rank, it is among the highest-ranking sciences. (2) The planets are causal agents, and their formal influences affect combinations of form and matter on the earth. (3) Astrology is compatible with freedom *provided that* a special place is made for the radically free will. For some of our actions and choices are causally affected by our physiology, character, and so on, and these can be understood astrologically. But free will and salvation are not subject to physical causes, and so astrology cannot do things like describe our spiritual natures. Therefore, astrology pertains to weather, the body, and other worldly events not in our direct control, and even some personality and character matters; but it does not pertain to our free will and ability to be saved.

That last part is very important, because it is still with us. In this compromise view, the more holy and blessed you are, the less astrology applies to you: for, those with the highest degree of self-determination and free will and spiritual connection, are not subject to astrological causes apart from physical things like illness and weather. But the less enlightened and less free and less spiritual you are, the more astrology applies to you. This same attitude now appears among some modern astrologers, but instead of being "blessed" or "saintly" we are "conscious" or "evolved": in other words, some modern astrology is essentially *a secular astrology for the unsaved*. Far from being a special modern discovery based on

Jung or the Theosophists, it is right out medieval Catholic universities, and before that the works of Abū Ma‘shar. Based as it is on an indeterminate, radically free will, it will probably remain with us so long as people believe in that kind of free will.

Alongside this theologian’s compromise was a certain view of horary astrology. For on the one hand horary is a kind of divination whose answers depend on the regular motion of the planets, and horaries seem show what will definitely happen. But on the other hand, they sometimes offer advice we can act on. Bonatti² argues that three things must come together for a valid horary: the causal motions of the planets, which in some manner the visit to the astrologer, a lower level desire or impulse that shows an interest in the matter, and a link with Divine Will formed through prayer and free choice. The link with God as a “root” for the question gives both active force to the free will, and moral justification to it (because it is a search for truth). Horary, at least, is participational with the universe and in some sense stands outside the normally-understood compromise described above. For this reason it was often condemned by religious authorities.

4. Changes and Trajectories

Let me summarize some of the general changes and trajectories in Western astrology, so far as astrological technique and concepts go.

First, the readability of John of Spain’s translations influenced what works were favored and what vocabulary astrologers still use. For example, we say “exaltation” because of John’s use of *exaltatio*; but if Hugo of Santalla had been more popular, we would be speaking of a planet’s “kingdom” or “supremacy” (*regnum*). The *Book of Aristotle* (with its Hellenistic techniques) was therefore ignored but shorter and easier works written in John’s style were read enthusiastically (as evidenced in works like Bonatti’s).

Second, introductory works like al-Qabīsi’s, which uses a weighted *mubtazz* and has minimal information on the annual predictive techniques, enjoyed great popularity and thus passed on the *mubtazz* but not the extensive annual techniques. This too, affected how astrologers worked.

Third, one clear feature of the astrology of ‘Umar and Abū ‘Alī (whose short works were very popular) is the use of methods akin to horary in delineating natal matters. Abū ‘Alī clearly draws on the older ‘Umar, and recommends looking at the relationship between the most powerful planet ruling the matters of the native, and the one ruling the matters of some topic (such as parents). The older Hellenistic-era material filling in all the details is disorganized and thin compared with the parallel account in Māshā’allāh or Sahl. But it would be familiar to people practicing horary, for which ‘Umar was well known. Thus the horary contribution began to blend into much natal practice.

Based on these trends and this new discovery in Abū Bakr, I would like to propose that there was a divergence of “lineage” in natal astrology. The first stream or lineage is the more traditional one based on Hellenistic techniques. It runs from sources in Valens, Dorotheus and Rhetorius, through Māshā’allāh and Sahl. It does not use a weighted *mubtazz*, continued to rely more on whole-sign houses, and borrowed little from horary technique. But it did not predominate in the Latin West and so was largely lost after the 13th Century. The second stream or lineage draws more on Ptolemy and runs through ‘Umar, al-‘Anbas, al-Kindī, and

² *BOA* pp. 264-65, the 1st and 2nd Considerations.

others. This stream adopted the weighted *mubtazz*, tended towards quadrant-based houses, and applied horary technique to nativities. It was more popular and so became favored.

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