

MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
History of Astrology
Week 3
Weekly Description
Astrology in Persia and the Islamic World
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Purpose of the Week

To gain a critical understanding of the nature and contexts of astrology in the medieval Islamic world

Tasks this week

Read the required reading and review the optional reading, seeing what may be useful as additional reading now or in the future.

Attend the zoom seminar, but listen to the recording if you are unable to attend.

Make sure that you have planned ahead for the assignment deadlines

Description

Under the combined impact of Christian opposition and, in the western empire, the Germanic invasions, astrology all but disappeared from the former Roman world by the early fifth century, although a lineage of astrologers appears to have survived in the Byzantine, eastern, half of the empire. However, astrology continued to flourish in Persia and India from where (together with the surviving Byzantine tradition). Initially the Arab/Islamic rulers who conquered Persia and large parts of the Eastern Roman/Byzantine Empire in the seventh century (Spain, North Africa, modern Israel, Jordan, Syria) had no interest in astrology, along with the rest of previous Persian and classical culture. However, from the late eighth century the Caliphs began to see themselves more as great cosmopolitan rulers rather than as representatives of Islam in particular. A great effort was made to recover Persian and classical culture, and astrology was reincorporated into intellectual and political culture. This week looks primarily at the so-called Golden Age of Islamic learning from the late eighth to thirteenth centuries. It is widely regarded that scholarship in the Islamic world went into a sharp decline after the Mongol conquests of Persia and the middle east: the Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258. However, like so many historical theories, this is now open to challenge from revisionists.

To look at Islamic attitudes to astrology in particular, they occupied the same spectrum as did Christian and classical. We can identify the following attitudes:

1. A religious view which identified astrology as a rival to God's sole right to know and control the future
2. A sceptical view which doubted the claims of judicial astrology
3. An Aristotelian view which rationalised judicial astrology on the basis of natural influences.
4. A Platonic view which rationalised judicial astrology on the basis of an ensouled, mathematically regulated cosmos

5. A Platonic view which was sceptical of judicial astrology while emphasising theurgy and the soul's engagement with the divine through the stars.

Astrology also had the same range of uses as it did in the late classical and Indian worlds. It could be used to analyse individual lives, answer precise questions, arrange political events, enable the soul to connect with the divine and conduct magical actions.

Problems of Definition

We commonly refer to the 'Arab' world and the 'Islamic' world. Both terms are useful but misleading. The empire conquered by Arab armies in the seventh century extended from Spain and the southern tip of France in the west, to northern India in the east, and all the conquered cultures were absorbed into the empire. The empire was Arabic in the sense that Arabic became the universal language both of religion (the Koran was, and still is, supposed to read in Arabic in order to gain a proper understanding) and intellectual discourse, and Islamic in the sense that Islam was the religion of the rulers and the majority of the population. It is legitimate to talk about the 'Islamic world' for simplicity's sake, as long as we remember that astrologers could equally be Jews or Christians (possibly Hindus as well) and that intellectual culture was syncretic, combining Classical/Hellenistic, Persian and Indian influences.

A.I. Sabra discussed the problem:

'the term Arabic (or Islamic) science denotes the scientific activities of individuals who lived in a region that roughly extended chronologically from the eighth century A.D. to the beginning of the modern era, and geographically from the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa to the Indus valley and from southern Arabia to the Caspian Sea--that is, the region covered for the most part of that period by what we call Islamic civilization, and in which the results of the activities referred to were for the most part expressed in the Arabic language'.¹

Sabra strongly criticised the kind of essentializing historiography that would 'explain' Arabic science as an inevitable product of language, religion, or culture, as if there was an identifiable, inner 'essence' in the culture. He preferred to understand 'the acquisition and adaptation of Greek learning in Islam ... not in terms of essences or spirits or inevitabilities, but as the outcome of choices by individuals and groups responding to their situations as they perceived and experienced them'. That is, we may think in terms of diversity, richness.

¹ A. I. Sabra, "Situating Arabic Science: Locality versus Essence," *Isis*, 87 (1996: 654-670), reprinted in Michael Shank, ed., *The Scientific Enterprise in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Pr.), 2000, pp. 215-231.

Technical Astrology in the Islamic World

The technical astrology which was revived under the Caliphs in the late eighth century was adapted from Indian, Persian, Syriac and Greek sources. From the Islamic world it was then reintroduced into Latin Europe - France, Italy, Germany, England and northern Spain - from the eleventh century onwards. The question is what happened between its revival and transmission to the west. Until recently the dominant school of thought was that no innovation took place. This has now been challenged. However, it is important to understand the wider issues.

1. Until there is a satisfactory history of technical astrology in India and the classical world prior to the eighth century we cannot tell definitively how far innovation took place in the Islamic world.
2. The politics of knowledge provides a wider framework. Although the Islamic world has been credited as a source of the ideas which entered Europe in the 12th century Renaissance and the 15th century Renaissance (the latter is always referred to as 'THE Renaissance'), wider debates have centred on whether the Islamic world made an original contribution. The argument continues with the scholarly consensus (if not the wider view) supporting the notion of an original contribution from the Islamic world. It would be unusual if there had been no innovation, given the dynamic intensity of scholarship in the so-called Islamic 'Golden-Age'. However, the question has to be asked because previous 'Orientalist' tendencies in the west saw the Islamic world as decadent, corrupt and superstitious, in contrast to supposed European rationalism. No scholarship takes this position seriously anymore.