

MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology

Astrology, History, Spirit and Soul

Week 4

Weekly Description

Astrology in Persia and the Islamicate World

Purpose of the Week

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

Tasks this week

- Read the required reading and review the optional reading, looking at what may be useful as additional reading now or in the future.
- Watch Chris's pre-recorded lecture on Astrology in the Islamicate and Persian Worlds
- Work on your first essay. If you have not chosen your primary sources, go ahead and do so, and post on the Forum
- Make sure that you have planned ahead for the assignment deadlines.
- Prepare for next week's seminar discussion.
- Attend the zoom seminar or, listen to the recording if you are unable to attend.

Description

Questions 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.

Arabic was the majority language of the Islamicate empire and the term 'Arabic' has sometimes been used as a synonym for Islamic culture. Dimitri Gutas was clear that 'Arabic' refers to the language used in academic writings but not the ethnicity of scholars.¹ 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'.²

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.

It is usual to talk about the Islamic world as encompassing both the geographical reach of rulership by dynasties and governments which adhere to the religion of Islam, and the cultures of those regions. Marshall Hodgson created the term **Islamicate** in order to distinguish the Islamic religion from non-Islamic cultures within regions with Islamic rulers, and to

¹ Dimitri Gutas, "Certainty, Doubt, Error: Comments on the Epistemological Foundations of Medieval Arabic Science", *Early Science and Medicine* 7 (2002), p. 276.

² 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.

discuss the 'social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims'.³ The term is now in general use.

Geocultural issues

Geocultural issues help provide context this week. At its height in the fourth century the Roman empire encompassed the entire Mediterranean region and briefly reached the Persian Gulf. Trading posts were established in Tamil Nadu, in southern India, from where extended lines of communication reached Southeast Asia China. The empire's geographical reach provided a means for the transmission of ideas and cultural practices, including the arrival of Greek horoscopic astrology in India in the 2nd century. Horoscopic astrology was also embedded in the Persia Empire which included Mesopotamia where the birth chart had first appeared in the 5th century BCE.

From the fourth century onwards Christian opposition in the whole of the Roman Empire, combined in the western empire with political disintegration due to the Germanic invasions, led to the almost total disappearance of astrology from the former Roman world by the early fifth century. A lineage of astrologers appears to have survived in the Byzantine, eastern, half of the empire, but lacking the prestige of former times. However, astrology continued to flourish in Persia, as well as in India, where the tradition of practice and belief was established which has lasted until the present day.

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, any more than in 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 via translations from Indian, Persian and Greek.

³ Marshall Hodgson *The Venture of Islam*, Vol 1 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975), p. 59.

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.

In general, Islamic attitudes to astrology in particular 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.

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.

Revolutions – Mundane Astrology

A distinctive Persian contribution to astrology is what came to be known as the doctrine of 'revolutions' (now included under the modern term 'mundane astrology', or world astrology), in which the observed revolution of the planets around the Earth, especially the conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn, signified key changes in history.

The Soul

Islamicate culture inherited Platonic and Hermetic texts from the Greek world and therefore an awareness of the soul journey – the soul's descent from and ascent to, the stars. The most famous exponent of the spiritual ascent was Ibn 'Arabî (1165–1240), a key influence on Sufism and much admired in modern Western esotericism. Debates in Islam concerning the soul and astrology paralleled those in Christianity and, Islamicate texts were influential in Europe from the thirteenth century onwards. Perspectives varied from:

1. A strict theological position which held that the soul was transcendent and free from planetary influence or signification.

2. A Platonic position which held that the soul was transcendent but still existed in a world in which the planets held significance (the view held by Ibn Arabi).
3. An Aristotelian/Stoic view in which the soul was an animating force embedded in the natural world.

These perspectives crossed over debates as to whether judicial, horoscopic astrology, was valid.

The Imaginal

The term 'imaginal' was coined by Henri Corbin in 1964, inspired by the concept of 'images', a word equivalent to archetypes. For Corbin the imaginal realm lies between the Platonic realms of Being, where everything is eternal, perfect and unchanging, and the world of Becoming, which we inhabit and where everything is subject to time. For Corbin the prime exponent of the imaginal was Ibn Arabi. The 'imaginal' is a popular term amongst exponents of a universal esoteric wisdom.

Thought for the week:

Can we talk about a distinctive astrology of the Islamicate world?