



# Case Study: An astronomical ceiling

The ceiling of the Sala dei Pontifici  
Borgia Apartments  
Vatican Palace

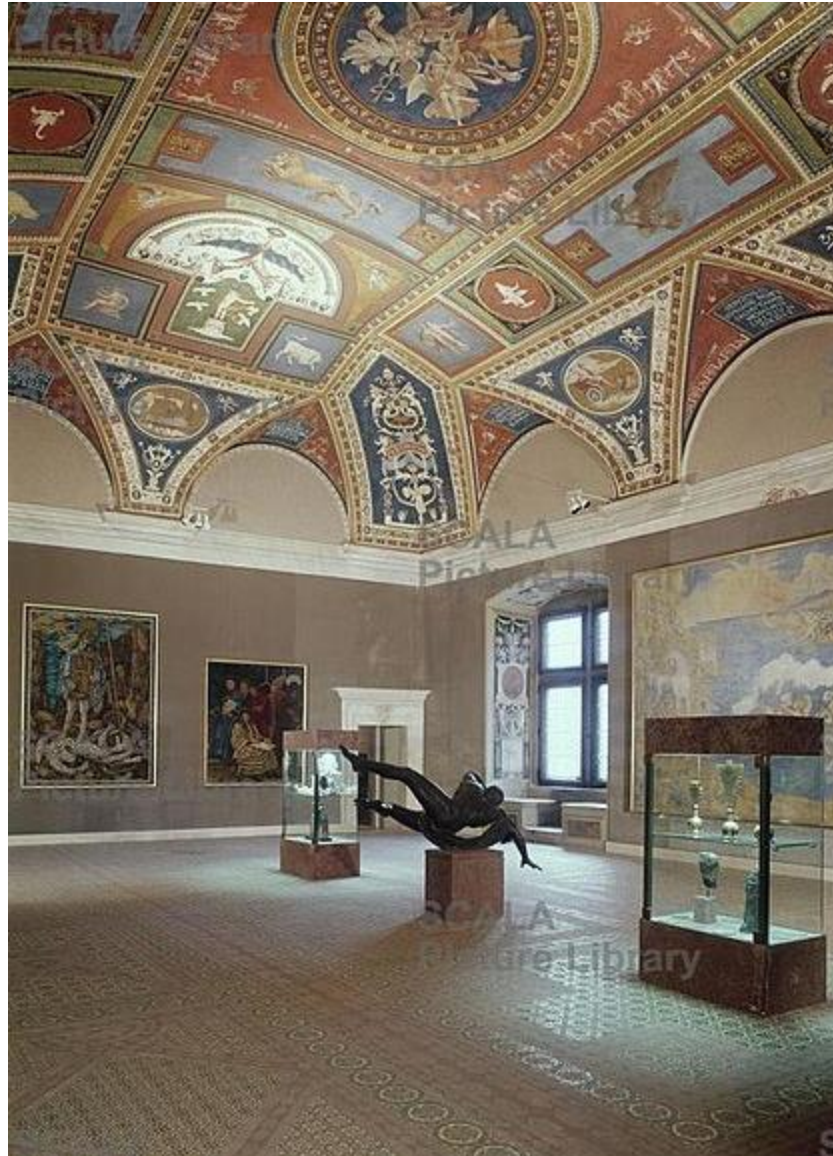


Prifysgol Cymru  
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Sacred Skies  
Dr Darrelyn Gunzburg

# Sala Dei Pontifici, Vatican Palace.



Ceiling of the Sala dei Pontifici, decorated by Giovanni da Udine and Perino del Vaga 1520-1521 during the papacy of Pope Leo X (1475-1521, head of the Catholic church 1513-1521), fresco, Sala dei Pontifici, Vatican Palace, Vatican City. *Image: SCALA Archives/ Wikimedia Commons.*

# EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

Pope Leo X  
7:00 am LMT  
11 December 1475,  
Florence, Italy.

Leo Pontifex maximus X. Florentinus Medices,  
natus anno 1475, in ortu Solis.

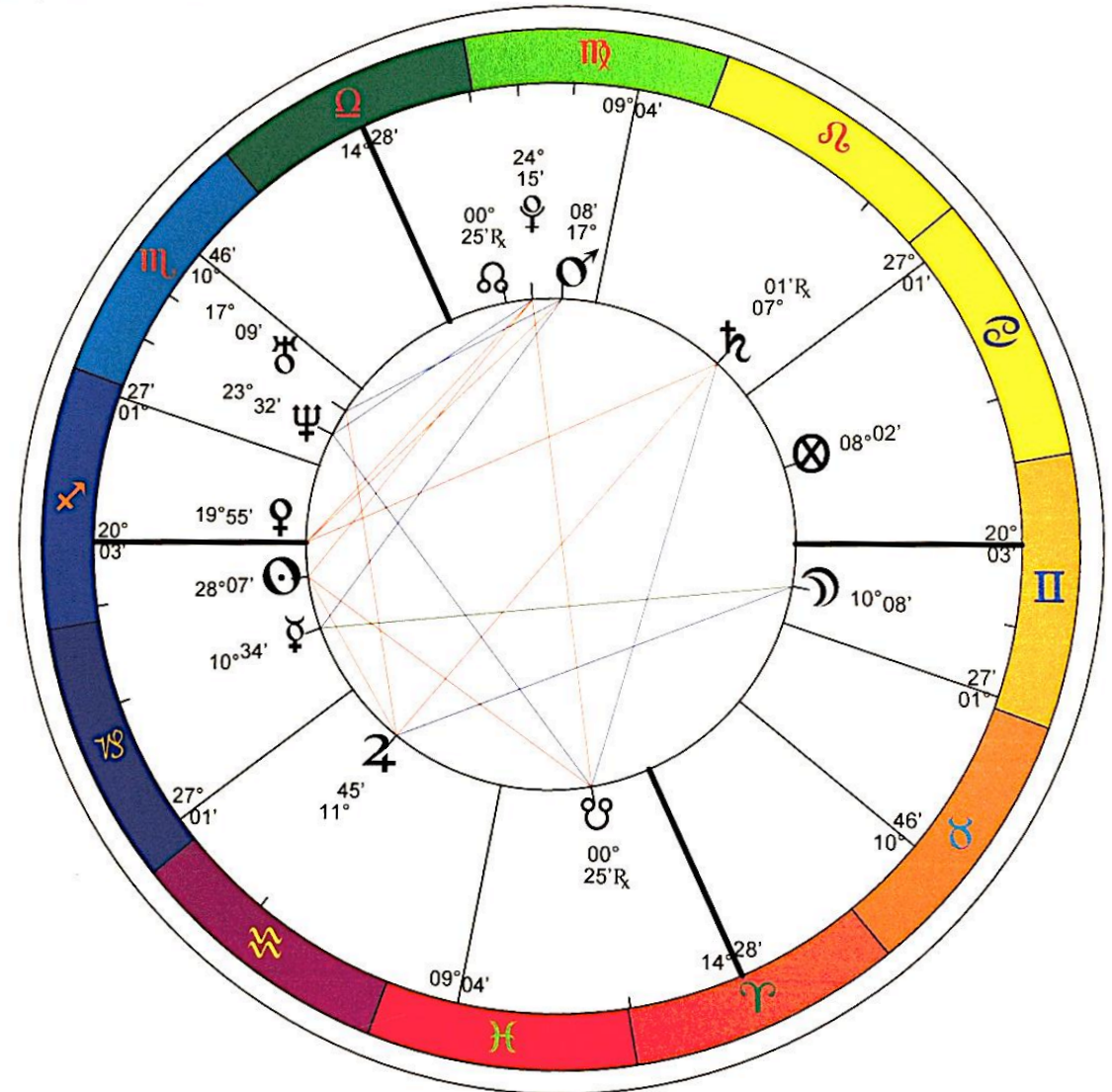
'Pope Leo X, the greatest of the Medici and of  
Florence, was born in the year 1475, in the  
rising of the sun.' (trans. Gunzburg).

Francesco Giuntini, *Francisci Juntini speculum Astrologiae  
universam mathematicam in certas classes digestam  
complectens* (Florence: Philippi Tinghi, 1581), p.1166

## Pope Leo X

Monday 11 December 1475 07:00 LMT -00:45  
Florence, Italy 43°N46' 11°E15'

Placidius Houses  
Tropical Zodiac  
Mean Node



## Sala dei Pontifici (Borgia Apartments), Vatican Palace

### Pope Leo X (1475-1521, head of the Catholic church 1513-1521)



Raphael, 1518-1519, Detail of *Pope Leo X with cardinals Giulio de' Medici and Luigi de' Rossi*, oil on panel, Uffizi Gallery, Italy.  
Image: Wikimedia Commons.

1520-1521:

Vault decoration by Giovanni da Udine and Perino del Vaga.

‘The astrological imagery dominating the room was conceived as a **metaphor of papal supremacy and power**; it is imagery of **cosmic predestination** enhancing the idea of the return of the Golden Age of the papacy of Leo X.’

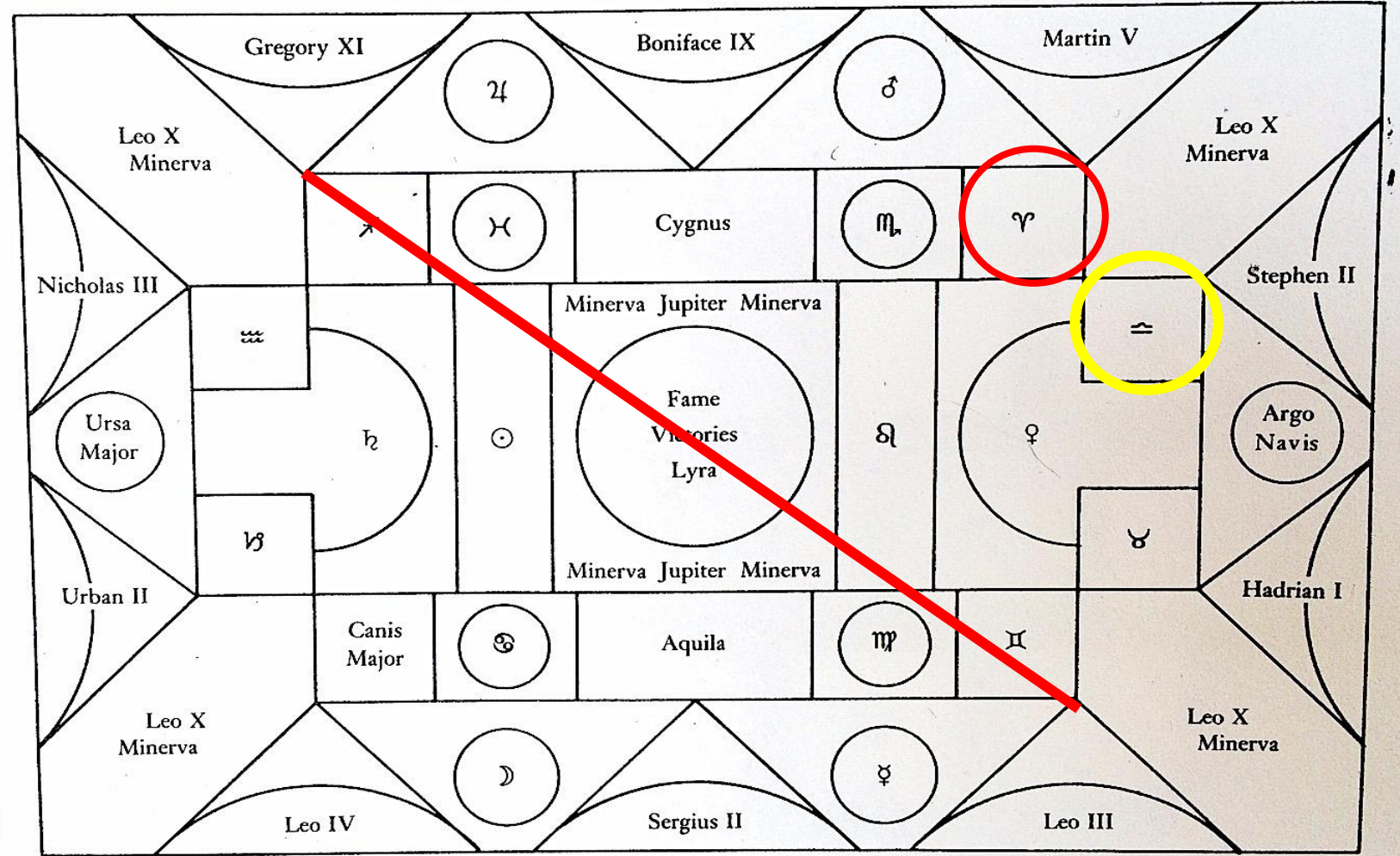
Cox-Rearick, Janet. *Dynasty and destiny in Medici art : Pontormo, Leo X, and the two Cosimos*. Princeton, N.J. ; Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1984, p.189.

In 2013 Quinlan-McGrath argued that art patrons of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries ‘**came to believe that celestial forces could operate through their works of art and architecture.**’

Mary Quinlan-McGrath, *Influences: Art, Optics, and Astrology in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), p.ix.

Claudia Rousseau in her 1983 PhD (*Cosimo I de' Medici and Astrology: Symbolism and Prophecy*, Columbia University) argued that this represents the Sag-Gemini Asc-Des axis with Aries as the nadir.

This raises the question of why Libra is not on the wall opposite Aries on the south wall?



12. Scheme of the decorations of the ceiling of the Sala dei Pontefici, Vatican

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Cox-Rearick, Janet. *Dynasty and destiny in Medici art : Pontormo, Leo X, and the two Cosimos*. Princeton, N.J. ; Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1984, p.194.

# RE-EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

Four angels/victories bearing the keys of St Peter.

Alongside, the chariot of the Sun and the image of the Lion.

Ceiling, Sala dei Pontifici (Borgia Apartments), Vatican Palace. Photo: D.Gunzburg.



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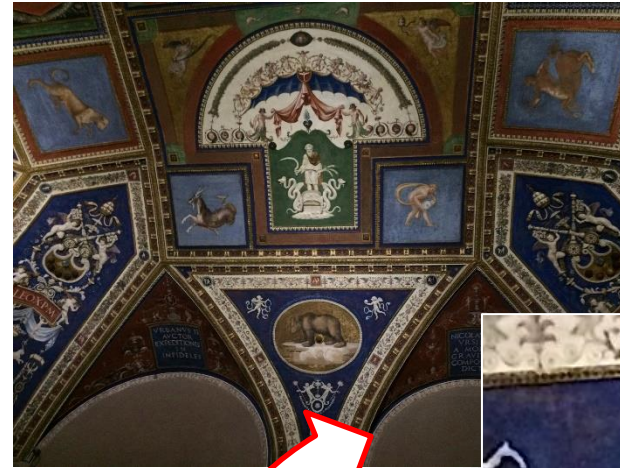
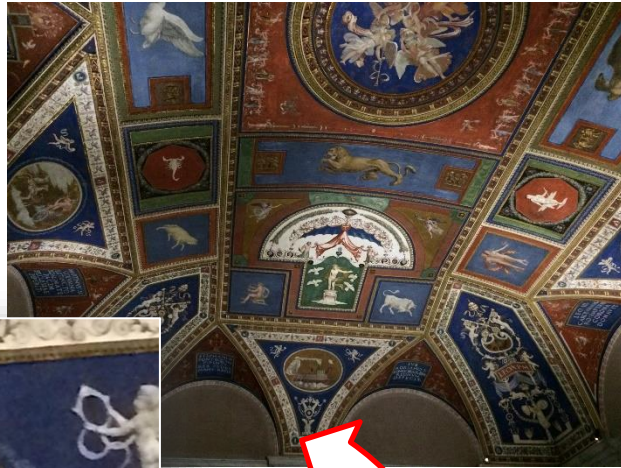
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# RE-EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

Ceiling, Sala dei Pontifici (Borgia Apartments), Vatican Palace. Photos: D.Gunzburg.

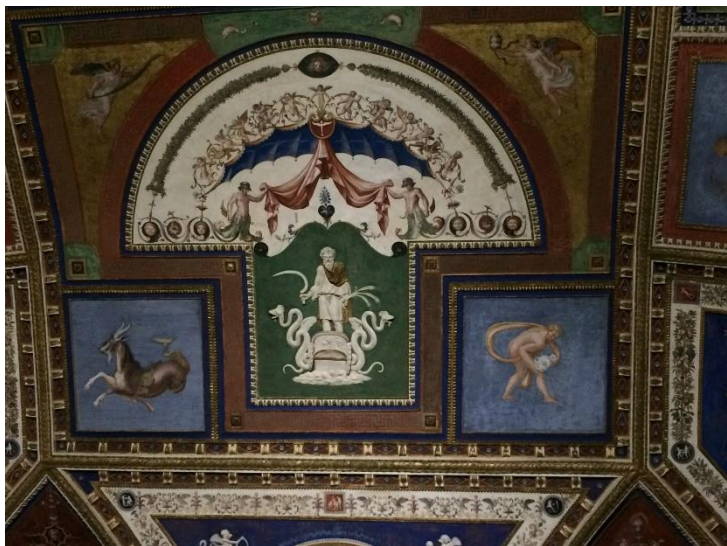
[Ursa Major](#), the Great Bear in the north.

[Argo](#), the great ship, in the south.

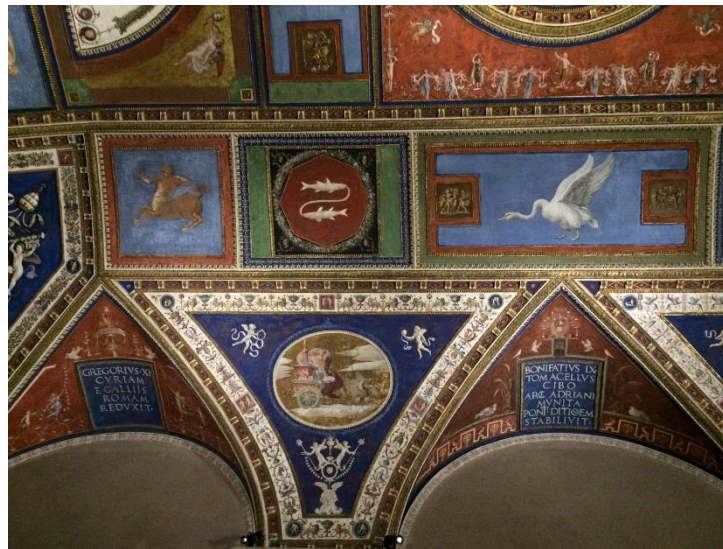


# RE-EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

Ceiling, Sala dei Pontifici (Borgia Apartments), Vatican Palace. Photos: D.Gunzburg.



Saturn with **Capricorn** and **Aquarius**.



Jupiter with **Sagittarius** and **Pisces**.



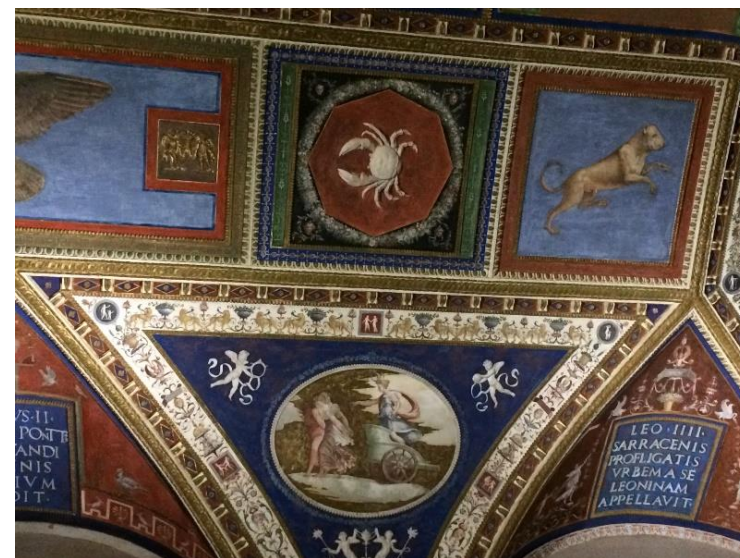
Cygnus, The Swan. Mars with **Aries** and **Scorpio**.



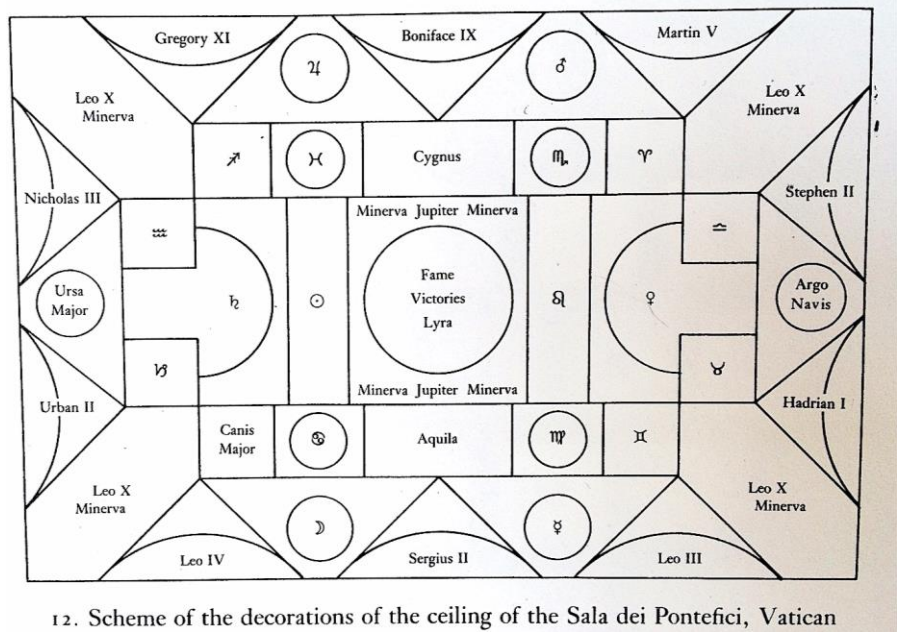
Venus with **Taurus** and **Libra**.



Mercury with **Gemini** and **Virgo**.



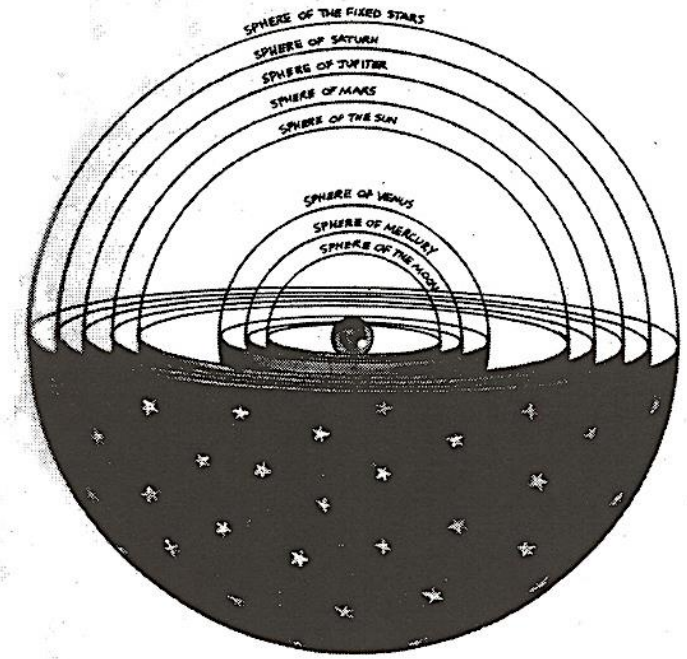
Canis Major. The Moon with **Cancer**.



The Chaldean order of the planets:

Saturn  
Jupiter  
Mars  
The Sun  
Venus  
Mercury  
The Moon

The earth as sublunar was full of  
imperfection.



Hawking, S. W. *A Brief History Of Time: From The Big Bang To Black Holes*. London: Bantam, 1988, p.3.

### Planetary Rulerships – Day and Night signs

|          |       |                        |
|----------|-------|------------------------|
| Saturn   | rules | Capricorn and Aquarius |
| Jupiter  | rules | Sagittarius and Pisces |
| Mars     | rules | Aries and Scorpio      |
| The Sun  | rules | Leo                    |
| Venus    | rules | Taurus and Libra       |
| Mercury  | rules | Gemini and Virgo       |
| The Moon | rules | Cancer                 |

When the luminary or planet is located in that zodiac sign its influence is at its **most powerful**. The planet or luminary is also said to rule those signs which means that the planet or luminary has **the ability, potency and unquestionable right to perform its function**, as al-Qabīṣī stated, ‘like a man in his home and estate’, in control and unchallenged in that position.’

Charles Burnett, Keiji Yamamoto, and Michio Yano, eds. *al-Qabīṣī (Alcabitius). The Introduction to Astrology*, Warburg Institute Studies and Texts. London and Turin: The Warburg Institute and Nino Aragno Editore, 2004, p.33.



The Sun driving its chariot  
with **Leo** the Lion.

Pope Leo X  
7:00 am LMT  
11 December 1475,  
Florence, Italy.

## IN CONCLUSION ...

**The evidence of this ceiling** suggests that Pope Leo X was placing himself under the firmament represented by the painted ceiling of the Chaldean order of the planets above (the correct order of the cosmos) so that he, as God's representative on earth, could maintain a just and thus correct order below.

This ceiling suggests that Pope Leo X was a man who understood that he lived in a **sympathetic world** where all things were connected and working in concert with each other.



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