

Week 4: The Renaissance & Marsilio Ficino Historical Context

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1

The revival of learning in medieval Europe

Beginning around 1000 – reaching a peak around late 12th/early 13th centuries.

‘Scholastic period’.

‘Dramatic intellectual encounter between scholars in the Latin West – Spain, France, Italy and Germany – and the rich intellectual traditions of the Islamic world.’ (Campion, *History of Astrology* Vol. II, p.29).

Charles Homer Haskins termed it the ‘Twelfth Century Renaissance’.

Fuelled by translation of almost all of Aristotle’s works in 12th and 13th centuries – brought about a fundamental shift in Western thought.

Cosmology of medieval West 500-1100 had privileged Christian faith in God and denunciation of astrology as demonic, alongside the Platonic view that all truth is abstract and cannot be obtained from observation of the material world.

Rediscovery of Aristotle’s work refocused attention on the material world and on the network of ‘sympathies’ from Stoic and Neoplatonic philosophy.

‘The revolutionary consequences of the translations of the 12th century on European cosmology – and intellectual thought in general – cannot be underestimated.’

Campion, *History of Western Astrology* Vol. II, p.43.

2

The revival of learning in medieval Europe

Partly driven by search for/rediscovery of astrological, astronomical and magical texts – seen by philosophers as important for understanding God's creation mirrored through the movement of the planets. Also practical needs – astrology for use in political planning and medicine

Atmosphere of official Church disapproval of astrology and magic, whilst tolerating it as useful.

Texts came to Europe via transmission from Arabic and Jewish scholars.

E.g. Gerbert d'Auvergne (ca 946-1003) – possible author of astrological text *Liber Planetis et Mundi Climatibus* (1010-1027) – text contains reference to Macrobius' commentary on Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* (core account of soul's ascent to the stars).

Liber planetis – hugely influential text – suggested that the soul, the part of us which might achieve salvation, was at least partly dependent on the planets for determining its personality – natural and spiritual worlds connected. Destroyed earlier Christian argument of Isidore of Seville that natural astrology and 'superstitious' astrology are distinct.

E.g. Also translations of Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* (1138) and *Almagest* (1160), Abu Ma'shar's *Maius Introductorium* (1140) and Al-Khwarizmi's astronomical tables (1126).

E.g. The Emerald Tablet – probably first appeared in the West in the *Secretum Secretorum*, a translation in 1140 of an Arab text.

E.g. Kabbalistic text, the *Sefer Yetzirah* – also suggestive of the journey of the soul towards God. Probably first translated in 10th century.

o Campion, *History of Astrology Vol. II*, pp.30-35.



Gerbert d'Auvergne – Pope Sylvester II

Image: Meister der Reichenauer Schule - The York Project (2002) 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei (DVD-ROM), distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH, ISBN: 3936122202, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=88920443>

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The revival of learning in medieval Europe

E.g. Kabbalistic text, the *Sefer Yetzirah* – also suggestive of the journey of the soul towards God. Probably first translated in 10th century. Also The Zohar – a Kabbalistic commentary on the Torah (probably written in 13th century in Spain).

Kabbalistic astrology not as a way of analysing politics or worldly affairs, but as providing the ritual context for making the ascent to the divine and transcending the mundane influences of the planets.

Zohar makes distinction between one who studies the Torah and can thereby release themselves from planetary fate, and those who do not.



Title Page of Sefer Yetzirah, Mantua, Italy, 1562

Image: Unknown author - Title Page of Sefer Yetzirah, Mantua, Italy, 1562, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=84949659>

4

Peter Abelard (1079-1142)

Weighed the argument between Platonist theory that planets are animated and moved by spirits versus the Christian view that they are moved by the will of God. Is the cosmos God (animate) or is it just moved by God?

Accepted the potential truth of Platonic thinking, where it seemed to fit with Augustine.

Made the distinction between *contingentia* (events brought about by human will, chance or divine providence) and *naturalia* (natural events, such as the weather). i.e. is human action fated or chosen?

Concluded that the planets do not determine our actions – God may know the future, but we will still have free will.



Abelard and Heloise in a manuscript of the *Roman de la Rose* (14th century)

Image: <http://web.carroll.edu/msmillie/images/abelard%20et%20heloise.gif> Uploaded originally 10:44, 24 Oct 2004 by en:User:Stbalbach, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=156610>

5

Hermetic influence

E.g. Michael Psellus (b.1017 or 1018, d. possibly 1078) – Byzantine Platonist monk, philosopher, historian. Used Hermetic and Orphic texts to explain the Scriptures.

E.g. Medieval scholars – such as Theodoric of Chartres, Albertus Magnus, William of Auvergne, Roger Bacon – mentioned Hermes Trismegistus or quoted the *Asclepius* (the only Hermetic treatise known to medieval Europe).

N. Goodrick-Clarke, The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction, pp. 33-34.



Michael Psellos (left) with his student, Byzantine Emperor Michael VII Doukas.

Image: Unknown/Άγνωστος - Codex 234, f. 245a, Mount Athos, Pantokrator Monastery/ Κωδ. 234, φ. 254a, Άγιον Όρος, Μονή Παντοκράτορος, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=8825891>

6

Soul: an issue of morality

By late 12th century, European philosophers had access to texts which postulated an ensouled cosmos in which a reciprocal relationship is possible between heaven and earth, centred on magical correspondence. (*Picatrix* – translated into Latin 1256).

Question of the soul is included in the astrology of Ptolemy (e.g. 'benevolent' and 'malevolent' planets) and Abu Ma'shar - therefore making a link to questions of morality. Does the horoscope show an ordained pattern or a tendency which the person can reject?

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) – Jewish philosopher – advocate of Aristotelianism but rejected the idea of having to reconcile Aristotle with mainstream Judaism. This influenced Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas.

Maimonides acknowledged a correlation between planetary movements and earthly events and accepted the Neoplatonic notion of a living, ensouled cosmos and planetary intelligences. However, rejected the idea that God's power is limited and thus rejected horoscopic astrology.

Astrologers polarised into those who believed the soul is subject to planetary influence and those who did not.

7

Medieval cosmology and Aristotle

According to Edward Grant:

- Medieval cosmology was 'based solidly on the cosmic conceptions of Aristotle' (p.417).
- Aristotelianism formed the dominant worldview from 1200 until publication of Isaac Newton's *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* in 1687.
- After this, Aristotelian earth-centred cosmology 'became irrelevant'.

Edward Grant, 'A New Look at Medieval Cosmology, 1200-1687', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 129, No. 4 (Dec. 1985), pp. 417-432.



Plato and Aristotle (right) in School of Athens fresco by Raphael. Aristotle gestures to the earth and Plato points to the heavens.

8

Aristotle

Early 13th century – works of Aristotle (*De Caelo* and *De Anima*) translated into Latin by scholar and mathematician Michael Scot (1175-1232).

Aristotelian cosmos – network of natural influences from heaven to earth.

‘The whole world surrounding the earth, then, the affections of which are our subject, is made up of these bodies. This world necessarily has a certain continuity with the upper motions: consequently all its power and order is derived from them. (For the originating principle of all motion is the first cause.’

(Aristotle, *Meteorology*, Book 1, at <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/meteorology.1.i.html>)

Huge impact during period 1200-1500 – Aristotelian cosmology dominated until challenged by translations of Plato and introduction of Platonic/Neoplatonic/Hermetic philosophy from 1460s (Ficino etc).

Also by publication of Copernicus’ *De revolutionibus*, 1543.

Aristotelian cosmology came to dominate the Christian perspective.



9

Aristotelian cosmology

On the Heavens (*De Caelo* or *De Caelo et Mundo*) - written in 350 BCE.

The motion of celestial bodies is ruled by a different principle to that of the world (sub-lunar sphere). The earth is made up of the four elements and are perishable – the former is made of a fifth element aether which is imperishable. Therefore the planets and stars are not subject to change or decay, as are things of the world, and their motions are perfect circles.

The planets are living beings with a rational soul (see Alan C. Bowen and Christian Wildberg, *New perspectives on Aristotle's De caelo* (Brill, 2009), also *Metaphysics*, bk. XII).

Dual nature of cosmos (corruptible sub-lunar/incorruptible heavens) fundamental to cosmology during Medieval period until mid-16th century (e.g. Tycho Brahe’s new star of 1572 and the comet of 1577).



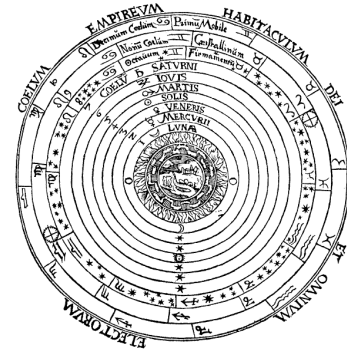
Geocentric celestial spheres; Peter Apian’s *Cosmographia* (Antwerp, 1539) (public domain)

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Aristotle – *De Caelo*

Cosmology of *De Caelo* presented problems for Christian scholars and philosophers

- God is replaced as the first cause of all things by motion, a physical force.
- Planetary causes and influences suggested that humans might not be free to make moral choices
- Augustine's distinction between the soul and the body in terms of celestial influence again raised.



11

Albertus Magnus (ca.1200-1280)

Reconciled some Platonic principles with Christianity – planets move because they are animated by soul (*Speculum Astronomiae*). Augustine had accepted celestial influence and Albertus found it possible thus to accept the natural influence of the planets as proposed by Aristotle.

Believed in human freedom of will: '...the stars are never the causes of our actions, indeed we have been made free agents by the Creator and are the masters of our acts.' (Albertus Magnus quoted in Paolo Zambelli's translation of *Speculum Astronomiae*, p.9).

We can thus be affected by the planets, but we can master them if we choose to – the soul is above the stars, although a weak person can become subject to them. The planets are not powers in their own right.

Humans combine both nature and will – nature is subject to planetary positions and motions, the latter is not. Clear demarcation between body and soul.

This allowed him to approve of the casting of nativities and electional charts, as well as making astrological talismans. In the *Speculum Astronomiae*, he advocated using freedom of will to elect astrologically propitious times to act. Everything is connected in the great chain of being.

[Laura Ackerman Smoller, *History, Prophecy, and the Stars: The Christian Astrology of Pierre d'Ailly, 1350-1420*, \(Princeton Legacy Library, 1994\), p.30.](#)



Saint Albertus Magnus
fresco by Tommaso da Modena
(1352), Church of San Nicolò in
Treviso, Italy

12

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Italian Dominican friar, priest, theologian and philosopher. Pupil of Albertus Magnus.

Sought to reconcile Christian doctrine/scripture with classical cosmology, particularly Aristotle's cosmology as in *De Caelo* with Christian doctrine.

Accepted Aristotle's explanation of the physical world, including his cosmology and physics.

On whether the stars rule human destiny: adopted and clarified the argument suggested by Augustine, Boethius, Isidore and Albertus Magnus, that the body and natural world are subject to the movements of the heavens, but the soul is ruled by God and humans have free will to choose between good and bad actions.

The soul can be influenced by the body and so be indirectly influenced by the planets. He cited the Centiloquium (attributed to Ptolemy) that 'The wise soul assists the work of the stars'.

His views were more widely read than Albertus', and he became the foundation of Catholic philosophy until the 17th century

(See Campion, *History of Western Astrology*, Vol. II, pp. 49-50).



13

Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas thus defined two strands in astrology:

- **Natural astrology** – 'impersonal astrology': concerned with natural functions and instincts – the movements of the natural/material worlds. Included medical astrology, mundane astrology, agriculture, meteorology.
- **Judicial astrology** – 'personal astrology': anything involving judgement of character or forecasting of the future – matters of human morality or destiny. Incompatible with Christianity if used in a spirit of denying moral choice – the astrologer is in danger of invoking 'demons' and of contravening Church teaching on free will. Included natal, horary and electional astrology – all deemed to be against the will of God (electional the most dubious).

(The Papal Bulls of 1586 and 1681 prohibiting astrology were aimed at judicial not natural astrology).



14

Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Contra Gentiles*

Written 1259-1265.

'Of course acts of choice and movements of the will are controlled by God. And human intellectual knowledge is ordered by God through the mediation of the angels. Whereas matters pertinent to bodily things, whether they are internal or external, when they come within the use of man, are governed by God by means of the angels and the celestial bodies.'

III.91.2:

'man is ordered in regard to his body under the celestial bodies, in regard to his intellect under the angels, and in regard to his will under God.'

III.92.2



15

Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologica (Summa Theologiae)*

Written 1265-1274.

'That astrologers not unfrequently forecast the truth by observing the stars may be explained in two ways.

First, because a great number of men follow their bodily passions, so that their actions are for the most part disposed in accordance with the inclination of the heavenly bodies: while there are few, namely, the wise alone, who moderate these inclinations by their reason.'

Summa Theologiae 2.2.95.5



16

The 14th century

Italian poet and writer Petrarch – looked back over the centuries since the fall of Rome and was the first to term them the ‘Dark Ages’ as a period of cultural decline culminating in:

- a) the preoccupation in the Scholastic period with Aristotelian principles of logic and scientific knowledge of the material world, and
- b) the Church with the increasing intellectualisation and abstraction of religious doctrines. Late Scholastic period – ossification of the original intellectual spirit of Aristotle and of Aquinas. Church doctrines, and ideas about soul and art and life, had become sterile and inflexible. Dwindling of creative scholarship.

Petrarch looked back to the culture of the old Graeco-Roman world and wanted to bring this cultural spirit into his own times. Beginning of the Renaissance in 14th century Italy – he travelled widely, collecting Latin and Greek manuscripts – Virgil, Cicero, Homer, Plato and so on. He developed a humanistic vision, based on the creative imagination and on the idea of humanity as the flowering of God’s creation. He saw his task as an attempt to bring together classical culture with Christianity, seeing them as twin branches of one pious philosophy.



Petrarch, 1304-1374

Image: Unknown author - <http://kinkanon.blogspot.com/2007/10/petrarch.html>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=5504913>

17

From Aristotle to Plato

Scholastic theology increasingly divorced from natural philosophy. A growing interest in nature – foundation of universities and secular study provided an ‘intellectual space within which Platonism and the *Hermetica* could be received in the Latin West.’

Geopolitical factors in the Mediterranean world and Near East – Ottoman Turks gained ascendancy as the dominant power in the Middle East, resulting in the reduction of Byzantine power. Refugee intellectuals, theologians etc began to bring the wealth of classical, Greek, and Arab manuscripts across into Europe. Culminated in fall of Byzantium to the Turks in 1453.

European contact with the learning of the Hellenistic world led to a revision of thinking on nature, the heavens and mankind. A shift of interest from Aristotle to Plato.

N. Goodrick-Clarke, The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction, pp. 33-40.



18

Florence and the revival of Plato

Florence became centre of this revival. E.g. Coluccio Salutati, chancellor of the republic 1375-1406, recognised the importance of manuscripts from the East and appointed a leading Byzantine scholar to teach on them at the university. Created a collection of scholars espousing a new humanist perspective.

1438-1439, Council of Ferrara (moved in midsession to Florence) – discussion of reunion of the Eastern Church with Rome. Leading figures in the Byzantine delegation were Georgios Gemistos Plethon (ca. 1355–1452) and John Bessarion of Trebizond (1395–1472), patriarch of Nicaea.

Plethon taught a pagan Platonic philosophy 'that understood the ancient Greek gods as allegories of divine powers.' Bessarion mounted a defence of Plethon and of Platonism against critics. Philosophical disputes helped create the ground for the growth of interest in Platonism, centred on Florence.

Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464) – ruler of Florence and patron of arts and scholarship. Interested in Greek philosophy and learning. Met frequently with Plethon. 1453 – many refugee scholars from Byzantium were invited to Florence by Cosimo. Platonist and Hermetic thinking came to flourish amongst the circle of scholars and philosophers he gathered together.

N. Goodrick-Clarke, The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction, pp. 33-40.



19

Introducing Ficino

- 15th century – vast increase in the Platonic and Neoplatonic writings made available in the West
- Revival and re-interpretation of the Platonic tradition – led to maturation in a Christian context of 'esoteric' knowledge from Graeco-Egyptian Alexandria
- 15th-17th centuries – philosophers and magicians deeply influenced by Platonic and Hermetic world views
- Marsilio Ficino – the major philosopher responsible for the rebirth of Plato's ideas in the West through his translations of Plato, of Neoplatonic texts, and of the *Corpus Hermeticum*



'The Neoplatonic corpus implied the existence of a universal religion, of which Christianity was perhaps the ultimate but not the only manifestation.... a tradition of learning, of intellectual, spiritual and imaginative insight, that found expression not only in the classical Greeks but throughout civilized history – in the Hermetic corpus, in Zoroastrian oracles, in the Hebrew Kaballah, in Babylonian and Egyptian texts – a cross-cultural revelation that bespoke a Logos that manifested itself continually and universally.'

Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), p.213.

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