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THE GOLDEN AGE OF ASTROLOGY

CHAPTER 1 (not published)

Persia: time as deity
7505 words

And the creator Ohrmazd entrusted all the good things which are in this creation to Mihr [Mithra] and the Moon and the twelve Signs of the Zodiac which are called by the Religion the twelve commanders.¹

In the winter of the year 531, some time towards the winter solstice and the shortest day, a group of the most distinguished pagan, Neoplatonic, scholars in the Roman Empire, set out on a journey to the court of the Persian emperor at Ctesiphon. They were in despair at the gradual closing down of intellectual inquiry in the Roman world, but hopeful that, in the east, they would find a more liberal environment, one in which scholarly inquiry into the nature of the cosmos would be encouraged. If any date marks the end of the classical world, this is certainly a prime candidate.

In the fifth century, learning in the Roman world was subject to a devastating combination of sustained political and military crises, and the dead hand of Christian orthodoxy, which could permit no rival source of information about the cosmos which it had not been sanctioned. And it most emphatically did not sanction astrology. Writing in the years 397-8, St. Augustine, the greatest of the Roman theologians, put it succinctly: astrology worked, but only because of two reasons. One, which he hoped philosophers would take note of, was chance, the appearance of coincidences which fooled the unwary. The other, far more damning, and directed at the faithful, was the warning that astrological forecasts were correct because demons were working through the foolish astrologers, trapping the unwary into eternal hell-fire.² And so, even though astrology survived in isolated outposts, amongst Jews in southern Italy, for example, or individual practitioners in Constantinople, the focus of creative inspiration departed the Roman world and moved east to Persia and India.³

The problem, though, for the pagan philosophers, was not so much official persecution. What's worse is that, in spite of the apparent vigour of the Platonic Academy at Athens in the 520s, once Justinian effectively closed it, they were ignored and their ability to influence the wider debate on the human condition and universal truths went into a steep decline. Certain essentials of Platonic thought had been incorporated into Christian theology, and intellectual vigour lay with Christian

¹ Extract from chapter 12 of the Zoroastrian text, the *Mēnōk I Xrat*, in Zaehner, Richard Charles, *Zurvan: a Zoroastrian Dilemma*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955, p. 400.

² Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S.Pine-Coffin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1961, IV.3, pp. 73-4.

³ For a detailed account of the transmission of astrological ideas between Babylon, Greece, Persia and India is Pingree, David, *From Astral Omens to Astrology From Babylon to Bikaner*, Rome: Istituto Italiano Per L'Africa E L'Oriente 1997.

refutation of pagan error, but with debates within Christianity itself, between guardians of state-sanctioned theology and the heretics who, since Constantine, had been far more of a problem for the authorities, than pagans. As the focus of Christian intellectuals was devoted more and more to such ultimately trivial questions as the precise nature of Christ's relationship with God, the mechanics of such matters as the soul's relationships with the stars were forgotten. After all, if one's chances of eternal salvation were a critical matter of Christian theology, why would one bother with what Hermes or Ptolemy said about one's soul? We know only of the occasional lonely figure who continued to advocate astrology as a path to knowledge in the sixth and seventh centuries. There was, for example, Rhetorius of Egypt, whose compendium of astrological techniques provided a valuable account for Hellenistic methods of reading horoscopes. We may assume, optimistically, that Rhetorius was writing because there was at least some demand in the Greek-speaking world, rather than just for his own interest.

It was the Abbasid caliphs, who took power in 750 who inherited the Sassanian's high regard for ancient learning and were responsible for the wholesale introduction of astrological lore from Greece to India into Arabic. A succession of rulers established the conditions for what has come to be known as the golden age of Islam. Al-Mahdi (775-785) founded schools and patronised the arts, Harun al-Rashid (786-809) signalled his respect for pagan learning by ordering a collection of original Greek manuscripts. Caliph al-Mamun (813-833), building on the imperial library created by al-Mansur, set up the *Bait al-Hikma*, the House of Wisdom, in Baghdad as a deliberate and very successful attempt to bring scholars together to translate Greek, Syriac, Persian and Sanskrit works into Arabic, and exchange ideas about the nature of the cosmos.

Or, even if the truths can be relied on, the institutional structures of mosques, imams, synagogues and rabbis are eminently disposable, mere terrestrial trivia when faced by the enormity of cosmic time. This was dangerous work, acceptable, perhaps, in the scholarly debate which flourished in a sophisticated, cosmopolitan environment, but it was always liable to attack by those for whom the *Koran* was the final word. Even so, it struck a chord as Islamic rulers turned to their Persian predecessors for cultural *kudos*, reviving the civilised splendours of the Sassanian court.

Abu Ma'shar's technical work was fairly standard and in line with the Hellenistic tradition. He ran through the meanings of the planets and zodiac signs in a routine manner, drawing on the accepted authorities from Ptolemy and Dorotheus to Masha'allah. The *Abbreviation* was essentially a list of rules for exposing meaning in the stars, and the whole work was designed to act as a handbook for the beginner and an *aide memoire* for the more experienced practitioner. It began, naturally enough, with an invocation of 'God, the merciful, the compassionate' but then moved straight into an appeal to classical celestial mechanics: the incorporation of Neoplatonic thought in Islamic cosmology through astrology was evident in the statement that 'knowledge of the things existing in the world is indicated by 'the higher bodies...by the powers of their natural movements'.⁴ In common with the sacred scriptures of the

4 Abu Ma'shar, *Abbreviation*, trans Burnett *et al*, I.2.

Jews, Christians and Hindus, the *Koran* offered few clues on the workings of the cosmos beyond the information that God – or gods and goddesses - created and speaks through it. Astrologers themselves don't need to know how the stars and planets move, he adds, for they are only interested in the effects of such movements.

Abu Ma'shar's comprehensive summary of Persian astrological history was contained in his *On the Great Conjunctions*, a book whose purpose was made clear in its full title, *The Book of Religions and Dynasties*, and in which he refined and elaborated Masha'allah's work. 'We say', he insisted, 'that when the conjunction of the two superior planets necessitate something in the changes of religions and dynasties, the changes of the Sharias and the Sunnas, the occurrence of important matters, the change of the kingdom, the death of kings and the kinds of occurrence of prophets, revelation, and miracles in religions and dynasties'.⁵ This 'conjunctional' astrology proved remarkably persistent. It was repeated by Al-Biruni,⁶ the most distinguished astrologer of the tenth and eleventh centuries and, by the fourteenth century Tunisian statesman and scholar, Ibn Khaldun, in other respects a bitter opponent of astrology. As set out by Ibn Khaldun, the total period of conjunctions, 960 years, indicated a change of dynasty, the medium period, 240 years, pointed to 'the appearance of persons in search of superiority and royal authority', and the short period, twenty years, exactly as Abu Ma'shar had written, pointed to 'rebels or propagandists, and the ruin of towns of their civilisations'.⁷ Ibn Khaldun also referred to a great lost work on these conjunctions by Al-Kindi, Abu Ma'shar's teacher, which had reputedly forecast the fall of Baghdad in the thirteenth century. The reason for the book's loss, Ibn Khaldun speculated, was that it had itself been destroyed when the Mongol general Hulagu, on his mission to destroy the Caliphate, sacked Baghdad and threw its libraries into the Tigris. Had the book forecast its own destruction? True as this might be, there was a problem with such prophecies, as Ibn Khaldun observed. The prediction that a rebellion was scheduled by the heavenly motions to take place might actually encourage instability, which is precisely why the Roman emperors had repeatedly tried to control the empire's astrologers. The perils of the self-fulfilling prophecy were not to be taken lightly, and Ibn Khaldun's claim that he had seen many examples of astrologically-inspired rebellions, suggests that this was indeed a problem for the authorities.⁸

In the absence of Al Kindi's lost work, or any earlier Persian material, our main source for historical and political astrology remains Abu Ma'shar, who delineated in

5 Abu Ma'shar, *On Historical Astrology: The Book of Religions and Dynasties (On the Great Conjunctions)*, ed. and trans. Keiji Yamamoto and Charles Burnett, 2 Vols., Leiden: Brill 2000, 3.5. For an examination of Abu Ma'shar's historical cycles see Pingree, David, *The Thousands of Abu Ma'shar*, Warburg Institute, London 1968.

6 Al-Biruni, *The Book of Instruction in the Elements of the Art of Astrology*, trans. R. Ramsay Wright, Luzac and co; London 1934, chap. 250, p. 151. Also see Hakim, Mohammed and Ansar Zahid Zhan. *Al-Biruni: His Times, Life and Works*. Delhi: Renaissance Publishing House, 1990.

7 Ibn-Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1987, 3.52 pp. 260-1.

8 Ibn-Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1987, 6.31 p. 408.

considerable detail the specific examples which future astrologers might apply to forecasting the welfare of the state. Every planetary combination could bring its own set of warnings. When Jupiter is in the seventh house at the Aries Ingress and applies to Saturn in trine or sextile, there will be lawsuits amongst the ordinary people, and 'plenty of terrors'; a conjunction of Mars and Saturn indicates skin diseases, a sextile or trine from Mars to Saturn points to fraud amongst pious people and kings and, when the Sun is involved in such a pattern in the appropriate manner, he expected 'the annulment of evil'.⁹ He then became more specific: when Aries is rising at the Aries ingress, which would occur in years when the Sun itself enters Aries at around dawn, we can expect tyranny, war, high pressure in the spring and intense cold in winter. And, in a possible echo of Assyrian texts, we are told that the Babylonian king may go on a journey and defeat his enemies while Armenia might suffer drought and starvation and the king of India may die.¹⁰

Anticipating the future was vital for political management although, for historians, identifying the ebb and flow of historical patterns with astronomical patterns seemed to take precedence over prediction, almost as if their purpose was to offer proof of God's plan in the correlation of the patterns of the past with the heavens.¹¹ But even then prediction could not be avoided for, if God's plan had unfolded like clockwork to the present, so it must do in the future. Amazing detail could be marshalled in support of this proposition. One manuscript contained ninety-three horoscopes as evidence, running from about 2200 BCE to 1000 CE. Abu Ma'shar offered only seventeen horoscopes, but over a larger time span, from 3381 BCE to 928 CE, while a later text, which focused on the career of the Mongol warlord, Genghiz Khan (1167-1227), took as its scope the entire period from the seventh to seventeenth centuries.¹²

Such work is part prophecy, part proto-sociology and entirely a matter of political management. We need to understand that, even though Abu Ma'shar's rationale, like Aristotle's is clearly Aristotelian (he talks of 'generation and corruption', the 'influences' and 'mixtures' of the celestial bodies¹³), the naturalistic, physical model of influences descending from the stars, and planets acting as natural causes, had little effect on his astrology. In fact, it was irrelevant. The actual structure of Abu Ma'shar's astrology is precisely mathematical, derived from the Pythagorean strand within Platonism. Everything in the historical process can be reduced to numerical formulae: when Jupiter is moving towards Saturn but still has 120 degrees to travel, prophecies

9 Abu Ma'shar, *On Historical Astrology*, 3.7-10. The first example requires that Jupiter is setting towards the western horizon around either 600 or 1200 from Saturn, in the second Mars is close to Saturn **GIVE DEGREES** and in the third Mars and Saturn are separated by around either 600 or 1200.

10 Abu Ma'shar, *On Historical Astrology*, 4.1.4.

11 See the discussion in Rosenthal, Franz, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, Brill: Leiden, 1968, pp. 110-113.

12 Kennedy, Edward S., 'An Astrological History Based on the Career of Genghis Khan', in S.Seikaly, R. Baalbaki and P. Dodd (eds.), *Quest for Understanding: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Memory of Malcolm Kerr*, Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1991, pp. 223-231, reproduced in Kennedy, Edward S., *Astronomy and Astrology in the Medieval Islamic World*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998.

13 Abu Ma'shar, *On Historical Astrology*, 1.1.3.

will appear, when it has 90 degrees to go, religious and political leaders' affairs will alter and, when there are 60 degrees left, conditions will similar to those that prevailed when the 120 degree situation took place. The whole situation is mathematically regulated: social, political and religious developments unfold with an unerring regularity. The question, though, whenever such predictions are made, is what on earth does one do about them? If the Armenians can expect starvation what action should the king take? Should he stockpile grain? If the king of India should die, can remedial steps be taken? Abu Ma'shar's words contain no more a hint of the necessary response than do most of the Babylonian astrological texts. In their case the appropriate prophylactic ritual, which could divert a threatened future, was specified elsewhere in the records, and we have no such evidence in the Islamic literature. We need to assume, though, that Abu Ma'shar's astrology was as participatory as that of the Babylonians. If an appearance of a comet in the king's horoscope or the solar revolution indicated rebellion,¹⁴ was a mighty caliph like **Harun al Rashid** likely to sit around while rebellion broke out? Or was he more likely to extend his spy network, bribe local officials and strengthen his forces in hostile areas and, perhaps, defuse potential causes of discontent? From what little evidence we have it appears that astrology became an adjunct to political decision-making, exactly as it had been in the first and second millennia BCE. Even in the fourteenth century Ibn Khaldun reported that 'Stories of soothsayers being approached by rulers...with the request for predictions, are well known'.¹⁵ We do know that Masha'allah, Abu Ma'shar's teacher, was consulted by political leaders. In 794 he was called on to advise Harthama n. A'yan, governor successively of Palestine and Egypt, concerning a rebellion in north Africa which he was expected to suppress.¹⁶ If Harthama's first purpose was to establish the likelihood of success the second was to establish how to achieve such success, to gain an insight into his rival's strategy, temperament and military strength. To be forewarned, in his view, was to be forearmed. In the event, the rebel leader, 'Abdawayh al-Anbari surrendered and the conflict, happily, ended peacefully. And conflict-resolution, in the view of astrologers from the Islamic golden age to the end of the seventeenth century in Europe, was to be one of their art's most important functions.

14 Abu Ma'shar, *On Historical Astrology* 5.7.15.

15 Ibn-Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1987, 3.52, p. 259.

16 Allison, Chantal, 'The Ifriqiya Uprising Horoscope from On Reception by Masha'alla, Court Astrologer in the Early 'Abassid Caliphate', *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 3 no 1, Spring/Summer 1999, pp. 35-56; Masha'allah, *On Reception*, trans. Robert Hand, Reston VA: ARHAT 1998.