



Judicial astrology in theory and practice in later medieval Europe

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Medieval Latin astrology

Sahl b. Bishr

John Dunstaple

Horoscopes

ABSTRACT

Interrogations and elections were two branches of Arabic judicial astrology made available in Latin translation to readers in western Europe from the twelfth century. Through an analysis of the theory and practice of interrogations and elections, including the writing of the Jewish astrologer Sahl b. Bishr, this essay considers the extent to which judicial astrology was practiced in the medieval west. Consideration is given to historical examples of interrogations and elections mostly from late medieval English manuscripts. These include the work of John Dunstaple (ca. 1390–1453), the musician and astrologer who is known have served at the court of John, duke of Bedford. On the basis of the relatively small number of surviving historical horoscopes, it is argued that the practice of interrogations and elections lagged behind the theory.

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When citing this paper, please use the full journal title *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*

1. Introduction

Many kinds of astrology were known and practiced in the middle ages. However, it is not until the Latin translation of the Arabic and Greek scientific corpus, a process which began in the late tenth century, that astrologers in the west had the technical means to practice Hellenic or scientific astrology, which incorporated the use of astronomical instruments and tables to observe and calculate the heavenly bodies with precision, the casting of horoscopes, and the consultation of scholarly textbooks to guide their interpretation. From this time, it is usually argued that scientific astrology flourished in western Europe, permeating natural philosophy, theology and the arts, and influencing politics and daily life.¹ Nevertheless, the medieval evidence for widespread client-based practice of scientific astrology is relatively thin prior to the fifteenth century. This article provides a cautious interpretation of the two branches of judicial astrology which formed the core of personal, predictive astrology, namely interrogations and elections. It is argued that these more intimate forms of astrology were probably not widely practiced until almost the very end of the middle ages. Overall, this

suggests that medieval readers were drawn to these parts of the Arabic astrological corpus as much for the sophisticated theory they provided of the relationship between the individual and the natural world than as a practical means for guiding individual actions and predicting the future. The essay is in two main sections. The first considers the theory of interrogations and elections as presented in works by the major authorities, especially Sahl b. Bishr (d. 822 or 850), known in Latin as Zael or Zael. The second part considers historical examples with a view to finding out something about the social and cultural context of the practice of interrogations and elections in one social milieu—late medieval England.

2. Theory

According to most authorities, the science of astrology was divided into four or more branches, which included 'nativities', 'revolutions and conjunctions', 'elections' and 'interrogations'.² This body of knowledge emerged out of a professional astrological literature which was created to serve the courts of the Abassid Caliphate (758–1258) and their heirs and rivals in the Islamic world. Its golden

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¹ See, for example, Boudet (2006); Carey (1992); Thorndike (1923–1958); Whitfield (2001).

² Boudet (2005a), pp. 61–64.

age endured from the time of Māshā'allāh (762–815) and Abū Ma'shar (Albumasar, 787–886) in the late eighth and ninth centuries CE, to that of Abraham ibn Ezra (ca. 1089–1167) in the mid twelfth century.³ From the twelfth century this sophisticated cosmopolitan astrology came to exert a tenacious grip on the later European world.⁴ While working astrologers in both the Latin and Islamic worlds were necessarily adept in all branches of their art, each of the astrological sub-disciplines covered a distinct sphere of human activity and had its own techniques of operation and specialist literature. Writing between 1361 and 1365, the French scholar Nicole Oresme reflected this understanding in the definitions of the branches of astrology which he provides in his *Livre de divinacions*.⁵ The first part, he tells us, is close to what we now call astronomy and concerned the measurement of the heavenly bodies and the prediction of events such as eclipses. The second part was introductory to the others, and concerned the quality, influences and physical powers of the stars, planets and signs. The third part dealt with the revolutions of the stars and with the conjunctions of the planets and could be broken down into three further sub-branches. Through an analysis of major conjunctions it was possible to understand 'the great events of the world' which he lists as plagues, mortalities, famine, floods, wars, the rise and fall of kingdoms or the appearance of prophets and new religions; secondly, there was the study of the atmosphere and the weather, sometimes called astro-meteorology; thirdly, there was the judgment of the humours of the body which comprised the astrological part of medicine. The fourth branch dealt with nativities, that is the interpretation of an individual's life and fortune based on the appearance of the heavenly bodies at the time of birth. The fifth branch of astrology dealt with interrogations: 'that is, [it] decides and answers a question according to the constellation which is in the heavens at the time when a question is asked'. The sixth and final part of astrology was elections: 'by which the time to start a journey or to undertake a task is ascertained'. These are the only branches of astrology that Oresme cares to discuss, dismissing such things as geomancy, hydromancy, palmistry and so on as 'not sciences properly speaking'.⁶

One major authority who wrote on elections and interrogations was Sahl b. Bishr, or, to give him his full name, Abū 'Uthmān Sahl ibn Bishr al-Isrā'īlī.⁷ Although Sahl was Jewish, all his work appears to have been written in Arabic from which it was translated into Latin, probably in the thirteenth century. Carmody lists fourteen works in Latin translation attributed to Sahl, noting that the first five commonly circulated as a corpus, of which the third section covering interrogations, and the fourth, elections, served as the foundation of his fame.⁸ Treatises on interrogations and elections were also written in Arabic by many other authors including Māshā'allāh

(Messehalla, 762–815), Abū Ma'shar (787–886), 'Alī 'Imrānī (d. 955–956),⁹ and, in Hebrew, by Abraham ibn Ezra (ca. 1089–ca. 1167),¹⁰ but Sahl's work seems to have been found the widest circulation. Excerpts from the Sahl corpus were included in Arabic astrological compilations, such as the *Kitab al-Bari* written by Abū al-Hasan 'Alī b. abī 'l-Rijāl (Haly Abenragel, fl. 1016–1040s), or the different versions of the *Liber nouem iudicum*. In Latin translation, he was also an important source for European astrologers such as Leopold of Austria (fl. 1271), Guido Bonatti (ca. 1223–ca. 1299), and John Ashenden (fl. 1350).¹¹

Unlike the grander cycles of life and the cosmos which were invoked in nativities and conjunctions, elections and interrogations were generally seen as lesser branches of the science of the stars. Ptolemy, the most illustrious authority for astrology in antiquity, more or less ignored judicial astrology in the *Tetrabiblos*. Nevertheless, there is ample compensation for this in the pseudonymous *Centiloquium*, a work that was attributed to Ptolemy in the middle ages but which was probably compiled in the eleventh century by 'Alī b. Ridwān (Haly, 998–1067).¹² Nicole Oresme stated frankly that he did not think there was any rational foundation to either interrogations or elections.¹³ For Latin readers, the philosophical distinction between interrogations and elections was addressed in the *Speculum astronomie*, the guide to approved and unapproved works on astrology and magic that appears to have been prepared by a group of Dominicans associated or led by Albertus Magnus in or around the time of the Paris condemnations of 1270 and 1277. According to this source, books on interrogations taught how to make judgments concerning a matter on which an astrological interrogation was made 'with radical intention', such as whether it will come to pass or not, what might be the cause of a matter, and whether it might be prevented or not.¹⁴ As representative of works concerned with interrogations, the *Speculum* lists texts by Sahl, Messehalla, and others attributed to Aristotle and Ptolemy.¹⁵ In other words, interrogations were a special kind of divination or augury in which the 'radical' nature of the question and the focused intention of the astrologer both played a part in drawing down the rays of the stars, which al-Kindī identified as the occult forces which empowered all astrological operations.¹⁶ Since there was no particular celestial event which was marked by an interrogation—other than the decision by the client to consult the astrologer and the astrologer to cast a chart—those who trusted in this branch of astrology had to have more than usual confidence in the professional authority and integrity of the practitioner they consulted.

Elections were more technical than interrogations and required the practitioner to identify, balance and temper opposing astrological forces in a horoscope. In a period before the availability of

³ The spelling of Arabic authorities follows Pingree (1990) with the most usual form of the Latin name given in brackets. Later citations are given either in Arabic or Latin depending on the context.

⁴ Pingree (1990). For astrologers in the later Middle Ages, see Préaud (1984).

⁵ Coopland (1952), pp. 52–53.

⁶ Ibid., p. 55.

⁷ Ullmann (1970), pp. 325–328, 309–312, 325. see also Sezgin (1979), Stegeman (1942).

⁸ As listed by Carmody (1956), pp. 40–45, the Sahl corpus includes: *Introductorium* inc. Scito quod [cum] signa sunt 12 [Carmody 3.1]; *50 precepta*, inc. Scito quod significatrix [Carmody 3.2]; *De iudiciis*, inc. Cum interrogatus fueris de aliqua interrogatione [Carmody 3.3]; *De electionibus*, inc. 'Omnes [sapientes] concordati sunt quod electiones sint debiles nisi in divitibus' [Carmody 3.4]; and *Liber temporum*, inc. 'Scito quod tempora' [Carmody 3.5]. For this essay, I have used the 1493 edition by Locatellus. see Sahl (1493a,b,c,d)

⁹ Carmody (1956) lists: Messehalla, *De receptione planetarum siue de interrogationibus*, trans. John of Seville, inc. 'Inuenit quidam vir'. [Carmody 1.3]; and, for elections: Albumasar, *Electiones planetarum*, inc. 'Dixit Albumasar: placuit mihi inter cetera uolumina'. [Carmody 13.7]; Albumasar, *Flores de electionibus*, inc. In nomine Dei incipient electiones' [Carmody 13.9]; Haly Embrani. *De electionibus horarum*, inc. prol. Rogasti me, karissime [Carmody 24.1]; Haly Abenrudian. *De electionibus* [Carmody 30.9].

¹⁰ Goldstein (1996).

¹¹ See Carmody (1956): Anon, *Liber nouem iudicum* I, inc. 'Abendaia . . . Zaelis liber incipit'. [Carmody 15.1]; Anon, *Liber nouem iudicum* II [Carmody 16.1]; Leopold of Austria, *Compilatio de astrorum scientie* [Carmody 38.1]; John of Ashenden, *Summa astrologiae de accidentibus mundi* [Carmody 39.1]; Guido Bonatti, *Liber introductorius ad iudicia stellarum* [Carmody 40.1].

¹² Carmody (1956), p. 16.

¹³ Coopland (1952), p. 56: 'La quinte partie, des interrogacions, et la sixte, des elections, n'ont point de raisonnement fondement et n'y a point de vérité'.

¹⁴ Zambelli (1992), p. 234: 'Pars iterum interrogationum docet iudicare de re de qua facta fuerit interrogatio cum intentione radicali, utrum scilicet perficiatur, an non'.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 236: Messehalla, *De receptionibus*; *De interrogationibus*; *De inventionem occultorum*; *De interpretatione cogitationis*. Sahl, *Iudicia Arabum*; *De significatione planetarum in domibus*; *De significatione temporis*; *Liber nouem iudicum*; *Liber trium iudicum*; Aristotle *Secundus tractatus*; Ptolemy to Aristoxenus; John of Seville *Tertia pars artis*.

¹⁶ Al-Kindī, *De radiis*, Cap. 2 (Alverny & Hudry, 1974). For discussion of this principle, see Travaglia (1999), p. 38.

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