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Michael Psellos and Byzantine Astrology in the Eleventh Century

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Abstract. The following work uses the writing of one of the most outstanding personalities of the Byzantine Empire, Michael Psellos (1018–1078?), as a conduit into the world of Byzantine astrology. The focus of the article is his celebrated chronicle, *The Chronographia*, which documents his life and experiences as an influential courtier at the Byzantine court in the eleventh century. Psellos was at the forefront of political life in the Empire and its fluctuating fortunes but somehow managed to combine these duties with a prodigious scholarly vocation. He taught extensively in both public and private capacities—he was appointed Consul of the Philosophers at the University of Constantinople—and was at the forefront of intellectual activity, touching on everything from theology to law, military strategy to esoterica.

Psellos' writings on esoteric subjects of all sorts, including astrology and other related divinatory practices, are a true treasure trove of information for historians of astrology and practising astrologers alike. This article looks at a number of astrological and divinatory episodes in *The Chronographia* before the investigation broadens out to consider Psellos' relationship to astrology in detail in a variety of other sources. This context is very important because *The Chronographia* is an imperial commission and, like many of his contemporaries both before and after, Psellos had to toe the line of official disapproval of astrology. It is quite clear, however, that Psellos' curiosity and attraction to the subject is barely concealed beneath the surface text.

For those who are unfamiliar with Byzantine history, the astrological episodes in *The Chronographia* throw much light on the niche occupied by astrology and astrologers in Byzantine culture. It may well surprise those readers who are accustomed to hearing of the achievements and activities of astrologers in the adjoining Arabic empire to be introduced to astrological activity in a Byzantine context which, if not as equally prolific, is never devoid of interest and relevance for historians of astrology. This work aims to offer a small corrective to the accepted notion of a moribund astrological culture in Byzantium. For all the work done by their Arabic counterparts in the Abbasid Dynasty, it still remains true that Hellenistic astrology was preserved and transmitted to posterity by the Byzantines.

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Let us begin our investigation by first collating all the *overt* references to astrology and astrological practice in the *Chronographia*. The first mention comes early in the work during the reign of Basil II, when the emperor is faced with the revolt of Bardas Phocas; the emperor's army faces up to the insurgents at the Battle of Abydos on the thirteenth of April 989 AD:

So the two armies stood opposite each other; the imperial army next to the sea, the rebel army on the higher parts, with a great space between the two. Phocas, when he learnt that the emperors (Basil and Constantine) were lined up for battle, no longer delayed hostilities; he marked that day as the decisive moment of the war, and for the empire. So he entrusted himself to the spirit of fortune. It was contrary to the advice of the astrologers in his circle to do anything; they would have diverted him from battle, and their sacrifices showed this clearly. But Phocas held out entirely and gave reign to his horse. It is said that signs of ill fortune appeared to him, for when he got up on his horse, his mount immediately slipped beneath him, and when he got onto another horse this one also suffered the same thing having gone forward a short distance. His skin changed colour, his mind became gloomy, and his head was troubled by dizziness.¹

We then have to wait until the reign of Michael V (1041–1042), and again the context is someone (the emperor) seeking astrological advice for the best course of action. This is a more extensive episode than the above, taking up three chapters in Renauld's Greek text. As well as giving details of the emperor's astrological consultation, Psellos speaks in the first person, treating the reader to his own views on astrology and his involvement with it. The emperor Michael was adopted during the previous emperor's reign (Michael IV) by the empress Zoe. Having waited patiently, and passively, for the throne, he now moved to

¹ Michael Psellos *Chronographia*, Bk. 1.15. All references to the Greek text of the *Chronographia* are to the edition established by Emile Renauld. The English translations for the astrological episodes are my own, which sometimes diverge from the translations found in E. R. A. Sewter's translation, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*.

downgrade the power of the empress and finally to exile her from the palace. In the course of furthering his plans, Michael takes advice from various groups:

Another group thought that the plan should be referred to an astrological prognostication in order to know if the time was propitious for the undertaking, so that an aspect of the heavens should not obstruct the attempt. And he, seated in front of them, listened gravely to all their counsels, prepared to do anything whatsoever which would bring him to success (for, at all events, he would drive himself on to realize his plan). Finally, he rejected the counsels of all the others, for he would learn what was going to happen by means of the astrologers.

At that time there was a group of distinguished men who occupied themselves with this science, men with whom I myself had relations. These men concerned their minds little with the order and movement of the celestial sphere (they had not learnt beforehand how to demonstrate these things by the laws of geometry and, certainly, had no prior understanding of such things); but they confined themselves to setting up the angles (of a horoscope), then observing the risings and settings of the zodiac circle, and all other such phenomena connected with this, I mean to say, House rulers, the places of their aspects and their terms, together with all such things as make them more powerful, and all such things that weaken them. Predictions were then given to those who posed questions [wished to know] concerning the things they asked about; and some of their responses were quite successful. I say these things because I myself know this science, having studied it for a long time, and I proved to be very useful for many of those men in their understanding of the aspects of the planets. That said, however, I am not persuaded that our affairs are dictated by the movements of the stars. But this issue, since it contains many controversies on either side, must be left for another examination.

But returning again to the present emperor, while hiding the nature of the deed he planned, he submitted a

vague enquiry to the astrologers, proffering this question only, whether the current heavenly aspects did not obstruct the one who dared to do grand things. And they, having made their observations, and having examined carefully everything concerning the critical times (of the planets), and seeing that everything portended blood and sorrow, prohibited the undertaking for the emperor. The cleverest among them advised that the deed be put off to another time. But the emperor burst into a loud laugh, and he mocked their science as a fraud. 'Away with you', he said, 'for I, with a grand boldness, shall surpass the exactitude of your science'.²

In our third reference, Psellos discusses the powers of divination that Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–1055) may or may not have possessed. The focus remains entirely on this matter; no attempt is made to broaden the discussion in order to debate the merits of astrology. Instead, Psellos dismisses the possibility that Constantine may possess this power and he attributes this belief to a simple nature. The Byzantines have successfully defended a major Russian naval attack with the aid of 'Greek fire' and Psellos is discussing a rumour (which he later refers to as a prophecy) that Constantine would face many dangers; all of these dangers, it was said, would come to nothing.

For a special fortune had come to the emperor, so that every revolt would be overcome with the greatest of ease. And Constantine himself, whenever he spoke gravely of certain prophecies and auguries concerning his reign, recalled some visions and strange dreams, some which he saw himself, others which he heard of from the soothsayers, and concerning this subject he would say some amazing things. So it came about that when danger was at hand and other men would be fearful and filled with dread in their souls for the future, he was assured that things would turn out for the best. He would comfort the spirit of those who were frightened, and, as if no danger were engulfing him, he remained unconcerned in the face of events.

² *Chron.* Bk. 5.18–20.

For me, I know of no power of divination possessed by the man, and I attribute this phenomenon to a nonchalant and carefree disposition....³

At this point, Psellos describes three types of men: the first type worry about trouble all the time and are fearful of all outcomes and cannot believe it even when they experience good fortune; the second type are simple-minded and happy-go-lucky and do not want to concern themselves with the causes of their troubles and wish to live easily; the third type is never unprepared for difficulty and remain unperturbed when confronted with it for they rely on their reasoning powers. Psellos then resumes:

But to return to the emperor, because he had often shown himself to be without fear in the face of problems, the people were convinced he had learnt the outcome of events from some superior power, and this was the reason for his contempt (of danger) and utter nonchalance.

I have made a long, preliminary explanation in order that, when I speak in the course of my history that he predicted or rejected this or that, the majority of people will not think that the man was a soothsayer; rather, they should consider that his words were in harmony with his character. The outcome of events must be ascribed to the will of God.⁴

Later on, however, during a detailed narration of the revolt of Leo Tornikios, with the rebel seemingly on the brink of success, Monomachos turns to Psellos and says:

The good fortune of the enemy, he said (turning to me a second time), will end today; henceforth, like sand collapsing beneath him, his fortunes will take a turn for the worst.⁵

3 Ibid., Bk. 6.96–98.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., Bk. 6.116.

Sure enough, the emperor's forces, desperately besieged, suddenly hurl a huge boulder which just misses Tornikios: 'From then onwards, their affairs took a turn for the worst'.⁶ In the last but one reference, Psellos' own abilities in the astrological art come under the microscope. The interest of this episode is heightened further as Psellos, in apologetic tones, appears to be answering accusations that he knew the emperor Constantine IX Monomachos was going to die, and in anticipation of this he retired to a monastery. Psellos also gives further information of the extent of his knowledge of astrology and his exact relationship with it.

It happened that, not long before the beginning of Theodora's reign, I adopted the superior life. Owing to the fact that I put on the monastic robe shortly before the time of Monomachos' death, many people were of the opinion that I had prior knowledge of the event, saying that I knew what the time of his death would be and for this reason I changed my life; the majority of the people judge me worthy of more knowledge than I have naturally. Because I touched on geometry, they think that I am capable of measuring heaven; and since also I studied the phenomena of the celestial sphere, they insist that I cannot be ignorant of the phases, nor of the obliquity of the ecliptic, nor of eclipses, of full moons, of cycles and of epicycles. They even judge that I can predict the future, even though I have rejected the books on these subjects.

Because I was also interested in horoscopes, enough to have some notion of the nonsense of this science (for the form of my teaching and the diversity of those who questioned me drew me to all the sciences), I am unable to avoid troublesome enquiries about this subject. That I have applied myself to all parts of this science I accept, but none of these sciences, forbidden by the leaders of the church, have been put to improper use. I know about the Lot of Fortune and the House of the Bad Daimon, but I do not believe that the positions and aspects of the stars determine matters in the sublunary world. Away

⁶ *Ibid.*, Bk. 6.119.

with those who tell us that there is a spiritual life and then point its direction towards new gods. These people divide our human life; they say life is generated and comes down solely from the creator above, but they also conceive of the stars, which have no reason, as living beings, and in all parts of the human body they give the planets a place prior to its living, and then they graft onto it the life of reason.

For a man to know about these things without adhering to them, nobody of good sense would find any fault with. On the other hand, if a man should reject our (Christian) doctrine and turn his thoughts to these theories, he would have cause to regret his involvement with this superfluous science. For me—and this is to speak the truth—it was no scientific reason which deterred me from these matters, but rather some divine force held me back. It was not a matter of syllogisms, nor, certainly, do I pay attention to other means of proof. But the same cause which has brought greater and more learned souls down to the acceptance of Hellenic culture, is the same cause which in my case forces me upwards to sure faith of our own (Christian) revelation. So may grace come to me from the Mother of the Word and the Son born of no earthly father, and the passion which he suffered, and the crown of thorns about his head, the reed and the hyssop, and the cross on which he stretched out his hands, my pride and my glory, if my actions did not always accord with what I proclaimed.⁷

We now arrive at the final reference to astrology and, although it is a very brief mention, the context in which it is uttered affords much interest and it is again very revealing of Psellos' views about it. Psellos is discussing the pastimes of his former pupil and now-reigning emperor Michael VII (1071–1078) and his aim is to illustrate Michael's all-round knowledge in many different fields:

There are actions and words which are becoming of an emperor, others which are fitting for a philosopher,

⁷ Ibid., Bk. 6A.10–12.

others for an orator and others which fall to musicians. And in addition, astrologers are concerned with the sphere, geometers with the demonstrations of their figures; the syllogism is reserved for philosophers, the secrets of nature for the scientists—each has his own area of competence, each expert has his own subject, all subjects of study are differentiated for men. But Michael embraced all of them...⁸

For the historian of astrology and for those with experience of astrological practice these episodes offer an extraordinary amount of information as well as items of interest about the history of astrology in this period. The *Chronographia* is a lengthy tome and the astrological episodes are a tiny fraction of the book. Yet the sparse and periodic nature of these episodes add to their weight and power in the narrative; each episode is memorable and the specific focus on astrology has a jarring effect in the flow of events. In this respect there is an interesting symmetry in the chronological sequence of these episodes. The revolt of Phokas, the first episode, occurs near the very beginning of the *Chronographia*; the fifth episode, on subject specialization, occurs near the very end. These are the two shortest episodes. Episodes two and four are the longest—Michael V's astrological consultation and the question of Psellos predicting Monomachos' death—with the third episode on Constantine's prophetic abilities, slightly shorter than these two, sandwiched in between. These occupy the middle section of the book, they are roughly equally spaced between each other, and there is a lengthy gap between the middle episodes and the first and fifth episodes.⁹ This lengthy tome, therefore, is framed at key points by astrology.

Perhaps the first thing that an astrologer would notice is that some of the major protagonists of the book are using it. In addition, the astrology plays an integral part in the unfolding of some critical events. The recourse to astrology needs to be highlighted; the importance of, and wide participation in, astrological activity throughout all cultures and

⁸ Ibid., Bk. 7C.4:

⁹ The page numbers of E. R. A. Sewter's English translation give a better indication of this than the book and chapter numbers of Renauld's edition: episode one, p. 35 ff.; episode two, p. 133 ff.; episode three, p. 203 ff.; episode four, p. 266 ff.; episode five, p. 369 ff.; text begins p.27, ends p. 380.

historical epochs, while common knowledge in astrological circles, has been dealt with much more surreptitiously in other academic circles, often ignored or ‘explained away’ as a superstitious aberration. Since the nineteen-nineties there have been signs of an awakening in Byzantine circles to the plethora of material at their disposal and the realization has slowly grown, with the publication of editions of each previously untouched manuscript, that the sheer weight of incidence of astrology cannot be avoided.¹⁰

If we turn our attention to the protagonists who use astrology, we find in the first episode a would-be emperor, the insurgent Bardas Phokas, who ‘had the backing of most of the eastern military families, the large majority of the eastern armies...and the Iberians. Like Nikephoros Phokas in 963 he could march directly on Constantinople...’¹¹ In the second episode, the reigning emperor Michael V has recourse to it. The third episode considers the astrological capabilities of the reigning emperor himself, as opposed to his use of experts in the field. In the next episode we are confronted by the possibility that the author himself is an astrologer. Finally, we learn that emperor Michael VII was an adept in all subjects, and the prior enumeration of these subjects included astrology. Three emperors, a would-be emperor, and the author!

Just as intriguing, astrology is associated with a major turning point in these episodes, which changed the life of the protagonists and, by

10 See the essay by Nicholas Campion on the phenomenon of ‘revisionism’ in the approach of historians towards astrological material in his ‘Astrological Historiography in the Renaissance: The Work of Jean Bodin and Louis Le Roy’ in Ed. Annabella Kitson, *History and Astrology: Clio and Urania Confer* (London: Mnemosyne Press, 1989), pp. 89–136; and in the same volume, the remarks by Nick Kollerstrom in his ‘Kepler’s Belief in Astrology’, pp. 152–70, in which he demonstrates that Kepler’s standing as an astrologer has been suppressed in favour of his purely astronomical achievements. See E. A. Paschos and P. Sotiroudis, *The Schemata of the Stars: Byzantine Astronomy from A.D. 1300* (World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 1998), p. 4. For the recent trend in acknowledging astrology in Byzantine circles, if only briefly, see the recent books by Judith Herrin and John Haldon: *A Medieval Miscellany*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999, pp. 28–29; *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565–1204* (UCL Press, 1999), p. 254.

11 Mark Whittow, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium, 600–1025* (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996) [hereafter Whittow, *Byzantium*], p. 370.

extension, given their standing and importance, the fortunes of the empire. The rebel Bardas Phokas himself intimates the enormity of what is happening:

...he marked that day as the decisive moment of the war,
and for the empire.¹²

In recognition of this his very next action is to consult the astrologers. After ignoring their negative advice, he is killed in battle by the emperor's forces. The Battle of Abydos, as this was known, marked the end of the great civil wars in the early part of Basil II's reign between 976–989 AD. 'In 990 the thirty-two year old Basil II was in an extraordinarily strong position. The defeat of Bardas Skleros in 979 had left the young emperor dependent on the Phokas clan and their allies who had come to his rescue; the victory of 989 had been won by the emperor alone, using his own forces and his own allies'.¹³ Psellos also describes a decisive change in the personality of the emperor:

From that time, the emperor was completely changed, and rather than being pleased with himself at what had happened, he was distressed at the terrible state of his affairs. He was suspicious of everyone, his brow was stern and serious, his nerves were troubled, and he was quick to anger and wrathful with those who had done wrong.¹⁴

In the case of Michael V, he, too, rejected the negative advice of the astrologers not to proceed with his plan to exile the empress Zoe. It proved to be the beginning of his downfall:

12 See above, note 1; Chron. Bk. 1.1.

13 Whittow, *Byzantium*, p. 374.

14 *Chron.* Bk. 1.18. This particular emperor, Basil II, came to represent for Psellos the archetype of the ideal ruler, an archetype replete with leonine characteristics. What would appear as straight-forward remarks in an historical narrative are loaded with symbolic meaning in the pen of Psellos.

Immediately, he got to work and went on to the attack, and the wretched boy fabricated certain charges against his mother, who was innocent of any scheming...She was driven from the palace and exiled on one of the islands near the capital, called Prinkipo.

But what happened from then onwards, words are inadequate for the description of the events, for the human mind cannot encompass the measure of Providence.

And at first there was no-one who did not murmur anxiously with his tongue and who did not ponder deeply in his heart the terrible sequence of events...but everyone was willing to sacrifice his life on behalf of the empress.¹⁵

A ferocious popular revolt swept the emperor from power and the sister empresses, Zoe and Theodora, were restored to the throne; Michael V was blinded.

We saw above how Psellos disclaimed the prophetic boasts of Constantine IX Monomachos. It was also noted how, once again, the main protagonist signposts the turning point:

The good fortune of the enemy, he said...will end today.¹⁶

And despite his earlier disclaimers, Psellos reports the collapse of the revolt of Leo Tornikios objectively:

From then onwards, their affairs took a turn for the worst.¹⁷

These first three examples illustrate how the utilization of astrology at the highest echelons of Byzantine society had a defining impact on the future course of its history.¹⁸ The next turning point involved the life of

¹⁵ *Chron.* Bk. 5.21, 24, 25.

¹⁶ See above note 5; *Chron.* Bk. 6.116:

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the author himself. Psellos, who was a man from a modest background, rose rapidly to prominence and became a valued advisor of Constantine IX Monomachos. He then abandoned everything for the life of a monk. Ostensibly this was due to the chaos of everyday affairs, but more probably it was due to the opposition of other factions at court resentful of Psellos' success and to which he makes occasional reference. The astrological information is not related at this point. Psellos continues his narrative of events and then, a dozen or so pages later, he mentions in a matter-of-fact way that many people had 'suggested' that he took up a new life because he was aware astrologically that Monomachos was going to die. This revelation gives the whole episode a completely different nuance. From the defensive remarks that follow it would appear that Psellos was not just setting the record straight regarding these 'suggestions', but was responding to accusations of astrological activity. We can now observe the irony of the double denial: Psellos denies foreknowledge of Monomachos' death, having previously denied that Monomachos was an astrologer. At any rate, scholars have talked of the monastic life not being to Psellos' liking, but one wonders whether Psellos knew that this rupture in his life would be short-lived:

When Theodora came to power, she recalled me at once.¹⁹

18 In continuing this theme, it is interesting to note that, where Bardas Phokas was a would-be emperor in episode one, Psellos seems to imply that on occasions he filled the role of substitute emperor, as in the uncertain transition period from the death of Isaac Komnenos to the accession of Constantine X Doukas: 'Such was the extent of my eagerness and my devotion for the man (Constantine) that, when affairs threatened to overwhelm him at times, I myself grasped the helm of government, and, by giving way here and battling hard there, I steered him safely to the imperial harbours' (*Chron.* Bk. 7.91). As another example of Psellos' exaggeration, the author makes a point of emphasizing his indispensability to Monomachos, to the extent that he (the emperor) tried everything to prevent Psellos leaving his entourage for life in a monastery. See Bk. 6.198.

19 *Chron.* Bk. 6A.13. John J. Winkler's analysis of Heliodoros' *Aithiopika*, whose central character is a female diviner, offers a number of insights which can be profitably transferred to the task of unpicking the text of the *Chronographia*: 'Heliodoros particularly likes to present casual conversations which unexpectedly lead to important revelations'. The tale of Egyptian Homer's birth is 'a digression on a digression', while postponement of information is one of the features of Heliodoros' narrative technique, with the

With this short sentence, Psellos' exile is over and forgotten and he resumes his prominent position at court.

The Fifth episode is qualitatively different from those above. It does not involve astrological activity as such but is a discussion about different parts of knowledge, of which astrology is one part. The emperor Michael VII is said to have had an inkling of all these parts. Even here it is possible to talk about turning points if we see this episode in a much larger time frame and in the context of the fortunes of the empire in this period. Both Psellos and his pupil Michael VII have been widely criticised for their superfluous pursuits while large tracts of territory were being lost in Anatolia. Skylitzes, a contemporary historian of Psellos, wrote:

While he (Michael VII) spent his time in the useless pursuit of eloquence and wasted his energy on the composition of iambic and anapaestic verse (and they were poor efforts indeed), he brought his empire to ruin, led astray by his mentor, the philosopher Psellos...Michael found time for nothing but trifles and childish games. The leading philosopher, Psellos, had made him quite unfitted for the position he occupied.²⁰

This may have been a small factor in the overall complex picture of the long-term decline of a huge empire, but this criticism seemed to carry much weight in that time.

For historians of astrology there appears to be a peculiar case of 'reverse moralizing' which deviates from the 'providentialist' outlook of

aim of gradually heightening the awareness of the reader with regard to a particular feature of the text. See John J. Winkler, 'The Mendacity of Kalasiris and the Narrative Strategy of Heliodoros' *Aithiopika*', *Yale Classical Studies* 27 (1982), pp. 102–3. The relevance of these remarks to this episode is striking. We begin to wonder even more when we learn that Psellos wrote a short *σὺγκρισις* of Heliodoros and Achilles Tatius. This text is edited and translated by Andrew R. Dyck, *Michael Psellus: The Essays on Euripides and George of Pisidia and on Heliodoros and Achilles Tatius* (Vienna: Der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1986).

²⁰ George Cedrenus & Ioannis Scylitzes, *Synopsis Historiarum*, ed. I Bekker, (1838–1839), 2 vols., 856D, p.725; 846A, p.706.

the vast majority of Byzantine historians and chroniclers. This ‘providentialist’ position can be illustrated with two brief examples from Eustathios of Thessalonika and Niketas Choniates:

This was how the situation appeared to be. But in fact, as God willed it, it was otherwise; for He wished to punish us for our sins against Him, but also to act kindly towards us by not casting us into the hands of Andronikos. It seems that if we had set foot only a short distance outside the boundaries of Thessaloniki, we would not have lived, but the dregs of his wrath would have been vomited forth upon us. And if there was a third divine objective, that our remaining there should be for the benefit of those of our brethren who escaped with their lives, this is something which those who lived through it with God’s help have learned.²¹

His trust (the emperor Isaakios Angelos, 1185–1195) he put in God, and he set his face against the enemy like a solid rock, making as a condition of his return the completion of his task; should it be fortunate, he would return, thanks to God, but should it be ill-fated (heaven forbid!) he would continue to rely upon the judgements of Him who uses the rod of sinners to chastise the lot of the righteous.²²

In the *Chronographia* Psellos deviates from this position since he appears to replace the providential deity with the stars. Bardas Phokas and Michael V both submit their plans to the astrologers; in both cases the astrologers see clearly (διασαφῆντων, κριβῶσ μενοι) that the matter will turn out disastrously and advise abandoning the whole thing.

21 Eustathios of Thessalonika, *The Capture of Thessaloniki*, trans. John R. Melville Jones, Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, (University of Sydney, NSW, 1987), pp. 68–69, Ch. 55 (p. 426 in the Bonn edition).

22 Niketas Choniates, *O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. Harry J. Magoulias, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), [Hereafter Chon., *Annals*], p. 245, (Ch. 447 in the 1975 emended edition of Jan-Louis Van Dieten, Berlin [Hereafter Van Dieten]).

In ignoring the advice and proceeding with their plans, both men display the traditional hubris (ἄβρις) against the higher power: in the case of Bardas, wilful stubbornness (ντεπεχειρει ὄλην), and in the case of Michael, aggressive insults (κα' τές πιστέμης καταμωκ'μενος 'ς ψευδοάς). The words of the astrologers hang heavy in the air as both men meet their violent end, the folly of their subsequent actions in direct apposition to the prudence of the astrologers.²³

This analogy can be extended further, for in the case of Constantine IX Monomachos we find not the traditional image of the pious emperor, but an emperor who has such faith in the sayings of the soothsayers and in his own prophetic abilities; 'that when danger was at hand and other men would be fearful and filled with dread in their souls for the future, he was assured that things would turn out for the best'.²⁴ Once again, these words redound back to the reader when, later in the narrative, the

23 The similarities with the scene related by Genesisios are striking. In Book One, the reign of Leo V, the commander of the Anatolikon theme, Bardanios the Patrikios, consults a monk with 'the power of prognostication' regarding his own imperial ambitions:

It is said that when Bardanios approached the monk, the latter revealed to him all his hidden designs, and went so far as to foretell his total loss of property and eventual blinding. Bardanios became indignant at these words, as they did not accord at all with his desires, but he nevertheless said the customary prayer and gave orders that their departure should be prepared. But when the monk saw the followers bring up the horses, he hastily urged Bardanios to return and hear more. The latter turned back with renewed confidence hoping to hear prophesied what he desired in his heart. But the prophetic man again dashed his hopes. 'Make sure that you entirely abandon your wicked plan, which has entered your mind for no good reason. You will suffer, as I have just told you, the loss of your property and of your sight...' These words made Bardanios wail aloud in grief, and, after uttering some wrathful insult against the monk, he informed his servants...

Genesisios, *On the Reigns of the Emperors*, trans. Anthony Kaldellis, (Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1998), [Hereafter Genesisios, *On the Reigns of the Emperors*], Bk. 1, Ch. 6. Based on the Greek text established by A. Lesmueller-Werner and W. I. Thurn, *Iosephi Genesisii, Regum Libri Quattuor* (Berlin: Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae, 1978).

24 See above note 3; *Chron.* Bk.6.96.

emperor coolly predicts the collapse of the revolt of Leo Tornikios; when the turn of events follow the emperor's prediction it seems to add up to a vindication of his great faith.

A picture begins to emerge of an impressive astrological agenda provided by Psellos. If these observations could be extended, seeds of doubt might be sowed with regard to Psellos' frequent disclaimers of astrology. When the focus is turned on Psellos' own expertise in astrology, and his understanding of technical terms, it adds further evidence to the emerging picture. Firstly, Psellos' knowledge is of such a high order that he is able to confirm or deny the accuracy of the astrologers' predictions, 'because I myself know this science, having studied it for a long time, and I proved to be very useful for many of those men in their understanding of the aspects of the planets'.²⁵ In fact, he could not avoid 'troublesome enquiries about this subject' and confirms again that he applied himself to 'all parts of this science'.²⁶ And he is widely suspected of having predicted the emperor Monomachos' death, important knowledge for someone to hold who served so closely a succession of emperors.²⁷

Secondly, Psellos' technical knowledge encompasses both an understanding of celestial mechanics as well as the terms and techniques associated with horoscopy and the art of prediction. Regarding celestial mechanics, 'because I touched on geometry, they think I am capable of measuring heaven',²⁸ If Psellos was able to master the obliquity of the ecliptic (τέες ζωνηφάρου λοξ'σεως), cycles and epicycles, (κῆκλων, επικῆκλων),²⁹ then he would be in possession of a fairly advanced, specialist knowledge which a proficient astrologer would be expected to have.

25 *Chron.* Bk. 5.19, p. 98 L11–14. Sewter translates the emphatic ε δ'ς, 'I know', with the lukewarm 'I myself have some knowledge of the science'. Renault also gives the emphatic form in the French: 'Moi-meme je connais cette science'. The difference for the present purpose is not negligible.

26 *Chron.* Bk. 6A.11, p. 77 L1–4.

27 *Ibid.*, Bk. 6A.10, p. 76 L1–6.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 76–77 L7–9.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 77 L10–12.

Psellos then goes on to show that he is familiar with the terms and techniques required for good horoscopy: setting the angles, or centres, of a chart, (τ κῆντρα ἔστῃντες);³⁰ the risings and settings within the zodiac circles, (τς ναφορς τε καὶ ποκλίσεις τοῦ ζωηφάρου κῆκλου);³¹ house rulers together with their aspects and terms (ο κωδεσπάτας, σχημ των τῶπους καὶ ὄρια);³² factors which strengthen and weaken planets (ἄπάσα μὲν κρεῖττω, ἄπάσα δὲ χεῖρω); eclipses and full moons (κλειψεων, πανσελῶνων); the Lot of Fortune and the evil daemon (τῶ κλέρον τές τῆχης καὶ τῶ κακοδαμῶνημα).³³

30 ‘Angles’ is the modern term for the ‘centres’, which denote the four cardinal points of a horoscope: the ascendant, or ‘rising sign’ and its opposite point, the descendant, and the point of culmination, the M.C. (Medium Coeli) and its opposite point, the Imum Coeli, the I.C.

31 Which could refer to the risings and settings of planets, signs, houses, decans, terms, or faces.

32 Ο κωδεσπάτας is more correctly translated as house ruler rather than the ruling (E. R. A. Sewter) or dominant (E. Renauld) planet. A useful glossary of Greek astrological terms can be found in O. Neugebauer and H. B. Van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1959). Terms are a method used to sub-divide each sign into parts of varying length, each part assigned to the rulership of one of the five planets—Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn. Thus, for example, Mercury, which has no particular affinity with the sign of Aries, will receive some dignity if it is in its own terms. A lack of a consistent terminology has plagued astrology throughout its history. Ο κωδεσπάτας can refer to a planet which rules the term of a sign, as well as a house.

33 The Lot of Fortune is a point derived from a calculation involving the Sun, Moon, and the Ascendant, and is said to be, literally, the point where one’s fortune is found in life. The evil daemon, a term not used by modern astrologers, most commonly refers to the most ill-starred house of the chart, the twelfth house, but it was also variously assigned to the sixth and the eighth. Less commonly, it can refer to a particularly malevolent planet. *Chron.* Bk. 5.19, pp. 97–98, L6–9; Bk. 6A.10, p. 77, L11; Bk. 6A.11, L 8–9.

When Psellos states, ‘I was interested in horoscopes’ (περὶ δὲ καὶ πράξ τῶν γενεθλιαλογικῶν μῆρος προσνηνευκα),³⁴ he could be referring to the purely technical nature of constructing a horoscope and the various factors associated with it. Or could he be referring to actual horoscopes already cast for individual personalities (the emperors he served, perhaps) or for particular events (the crowning of an emperor, the investiture of a Patriarch, a crucial military battle)? Given that Psellos emphasizes the amount of time he spent studying astrology, and given in particular the time he spent moving in astrological circles and having social intercourse with them (ὄδρες οὐρανὸν κτλ συνωμίλησα),³⁵ we are entitled to surmise that he became very familiar with this type of material; it would be extremely odd if he did not, given the nature of his claims. We could reasonably expect that Psellos had access to any horoscopes that would have existed for the major personalities of his time, and as emperors and rulers were favourite subjects for astrologers then he was probably familiar with the horoscopes of all the emperors and empresses under whom he served. The substance behind the widely-held suspicion that Psellos predicted Monomachos’ death is provided by the man himself, who talks up his own extensive knowledge of, and involvement with, astrology, for deep suspicion would not have been provoked by the occasional dabbling but rather by some form of prolonged preoccupation. With this in mind it is of some interest to note Psellos’ half-hearted denial: ‘but none of these sciences, forbidden by the leaders of the church, have been put to improper use’.³⁶

It appears that a desire to stay on the right side of the relevant authorities accounts for the ambiguity in Psellos’ discourses on astrology. In the two longest episodes which deal with astrology in the *Chronographia*, Psellos issues no fewer than four repudiations of astrology:

I am not persuaded that our affairs are dictated by the movements of the stars.

³⁴ *Chron.* Bk. 6A.11, p. 77, L1–2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Bk. 5.19, p. 97, L2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Bk. 6A.11, p. 78, L7–8. Note Psellos’ choice of words: ‘improper use’. Does this mean there was a legitimate use of horoscopes?

They even judge that I can predict the future, even though I have rejected the books on these subjects.
...Because also I was interested in horoscopes, enough to have some notion of the nonsense of this science...
...But I do not believe that the positions and aspects of the stars determine matters in the sublunary world.³⁷

Either side of these negative statements are his positive statements in which he proclaims the extent of his astrological expertise; he can even praise astrologers when they get it right: 'Some of their responses were quite successful'.³⁸ Can the fear of persecution make sense of what is going on here? Let us turn our attention to this factor because, as we shall see, Psellos himself makes clear but coded allusion to this perennial threat.

Many scholars have highlighted the issue of free expression and repression in the Byzantine Empire in this period. The picture which emerges is one of Byzantine writers and intellectuals developing strategies which enabled them to express criticism of the current ruling emperor, and representatives of the imperial power, and to state ideas which might be considered questionable, under a 'flattering and coaxing surface'.³⁹ In a well-known article, Robert Browning states that although there was little direct repression, 'the intellectual climate, the structure of the education of the elite, the prospects of a career, all conspired to turn the young away from a dangerously critical attitude...'⁴⁰ In the episode

37 Ibid., Bk.5.19, p. 98, L14–15; Bk.6A.10, p. 77, L11–12; Bk. 6A.11, p. 77, L1–2; Bk. 6A.11, p. 77, L9–10.

38 Ibid., Bk. 5.19, p. 98, L11–12.

39 Alexander Kazhdan and Giles Constable, *People and Power in Byzantium* (1982), p. 157. Joan M. Hussey adds that the Byzantine scholar 'was...always conscious that, however wide his dialectical activities might range in private thought, he must guard against presenting them to the public if they were in any way antagonistic to the doctrines of the Orthodox Church; the bounds of orthodoxy were easy to cross, especially as he was free to read what he would, relying on his own common sense to sift the good from the bad, the orthodox from the heretical'. Hussey, *Church and Learning* (1937), p. vii.

when Psellos himself falls foul of his friend-turned-accuser John Xiphilinos, we have all the information we need about the environment in which he had to operate. Faced with the charge that he took his Platonism more seriously than his Orthodox Christianity, Psellos responds that he used Plato's philosophy to fight against heresy, and in this he followed the example of the Fathers, adding that he purified Plato's writings of all impurities.⁴¹ We know that Psellos had open enemies at court, yet this charge was laid by a very close working colleague and life-long friend.

The author himself gives the reader a clear indication of the constraints he was working within towards the end of the fourth astrological episode. Psellos makes a series of statements at this juncture which are remarkable for the fact that they barely conceal the (self-) censorship to which he was forced to subject himself. Couched in the language of science and metaphysics in order to divert the attention of the reader from this fact, he states:

For my part—and this is to speak the truth—it was no scientific reason which deterred me from these matters (i.e. astrology), but rather some divine force held me back. It was not a matter of syllogisms (logical reasoning), nor, certainly, do I pay attention to other means of proof.⁴²

40 Robert Browning, 'Enlightenment and Repression in Byzantium in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries', *Past and Present* 69 (1975), [Hereafter Browning, 'Enlightenment and Repression'], p. 17.

41 Psellos, *Letter to Xiphilinos*:

L 6–8: Why, then, do you not also accuse the holy Fathers, who also made use of these ideas, from which the heresies of Eunomius and Apollinarius began, striking them with the truth of syllogisms?

L26–28: But I have not introduced from there something like a disease of the eyes, but fairly loving the light of his springs, I purified them of the grime.

See also the edition in Sathas, *MEΣ. BIB.*, No. 175, pp. 444–45.

42 *Chron.* Bk. 6A.12, p.77–78, L5–8.

Nobody had managed to persuade Psellos through scientific proof or rational argument that the truth claims of astrology were to be found wanting, and he, as a philosopher, was not prepared to accept any other means of persuasion. Psellos makes allusion to the fact that he had to temper his interest and involvement in astrology to satisfy the established religious authorities, which is the likely meaning of his reference to ‘some divine force’ and not some sort of supernatural power. Suddenly, those frequent disclaimers of astrology listed above take on an almost sinister new light against the backdrop of this statement.

Psellos very next statement continues the theme and throws into sharp relief the nature of his predicament:

But the same cause which has brought greater and more learned souls down to the acceptance of Hellenic culture, is the same cause which in my case forces me upwards to sure faith of our own (Christian) revelation.⁴³

Here, the language employed is even more ambiguous than that used in the preceding sentence but Psellos appears to be alluding to an element of compulsion which forces him to accept the Christian faith: the striking image of more learned souls than Psellos being forced down to accept something (Hellenic culture), and he being forced up to accept Christianity, is an effective device for creating this confusion. Anthony Kaldellis has given an extended treatment of these lines and, as well as concluding that the compelling force is the coercive power of the Orthodox Church, he states that Psellos is drawing attention to the fact that all philosophers in all societies, whether in pre-Christian Hellenistic times or in the Byzantine empire, are obliged to accept the dominant religions of their societies, ‘though always exoterically’.⁴⁴

Psellos’ concluding words in this episode more or less give the game away: ‘So may grace come to me from the Mother of the Word and the Son born of no earthly father...if my actions did not always accord with what I proclaimed’.⁴⁵ Compare these words with those which begin the

43 *Chron.* Bk. 6A.12, p.78, L8–11.

44 Anthony Kaldellis, *The Argument of Psellos* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), [Hereafter: Kaldellis, *Argument*], pp. 119–27.

45 *Chron.* Bk. 6A.12, p. 78, L11–16.

very same paragraph: ‘For a man to know about these things (i.e. astrology) without adhering to them, nobody of good sense would find any fault with’.⁴⁶ These words are diametrically opposed not only in place but also in meaning. Psellos is making an open apology, asking for understanding and forgiveness for the fact that he did do a lot of astrology and his frequent disclaimers can now be seen for what they are. By identifying himself exoterically with the established religion of the empire, he could divert attention away from those interests and beliefs he had which would cause questions to be asked by those authorities, whether it might be his interest in Platonic philosophy, the Chaldaean Oracles, or astrology. The irony of Psellos’ double denial, referred to above, can now be more effectively unravelled. What better way for Psellos to divert attention from his own astrological skill than by focusing on the alleged skills of emperor Constantine IX Monomachos—the discussion takes up three chapters—dismissing them out of hand utterly and scornfully, and then piously concluding: ‘The outcome of events must be ascribed to the will of God’.⁴⁷

The Five episodes in which Psellos introduces astrology into the narrative offer the modern day astrologer a considerable amount of information about the place and standing of astrology and astrologers in Byzantine society. Psellos himself tells us that astrology is ‘forbidden by the leaders of the church’ (τῶν πειρημηῶν τοῦ θεοσάφους).⁴⁸ The threat of ecclesiastical censure, and a heresy trial leading to exile and/or confinement, was a real one for anybody stepping over the mark, as Psellos’ own pupil and successor as ‘consul of the philosophers’, John Italos, would painfully discover and which the heresy trials of the twelfth century would illustrate.⁴⁹ Note, however, the ambiguity and extreme

46 Ibid., Bk. 6A.12, p. 77, L1–2.

47 Ibid., Bk. 6.98, p. 14, L5–6.

48 Ibid., Bk. 6A.11, p. 77, L6–7.

49 Anna Komnena, *The Alexiad*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (Penguin, 1969) Bk. 5, Ch.9, pp. 179–80; see also the Greek text established by Bernard Leib, Vol. 2, (Paris: Société d’Édition ‘Les Belles Lettres’, 1967), Bks. 5–10, pp. 37–40. Browning, ‘Enlightenment and Repression’, p.17–19, states that the upsurge of trials for ‘intellectual’ heresy was something new and specific to the twelfth century. The trial of John Italos and the accusations against Psellos by his friend

irony of Psellos' own position: he who suffered at the hands of his friend-turned-accuser himself composed an 'Accusation' of considerable length for the purpose of deposing the Patriarch Kerularios. The Patriarch pursued Chaldaean philosophy and the Chaldaean Oracles with two monks, John and Nicetas, and their companion, the prophetess Dosithea, and in the process of narrating their adventures Psellos displays his own in-depth knowledge of Chaldaean teachings, surpassing even that of the Patriarch!⁵⁰ This is not surprising given that Psellos composed treatises on the Chaldaean Oracles and became so proficient in their use that he was able to dispense with the commentary of Proclus on the Oracles.⁵¹

That Psellos should refer to 'the leaders' of the ecclesiastical authorities who forbid astrology is interesting. It occurs in the fourth astrological episode. It may be that Psellos is using this phrase generically to refer to the entire Christian movement, its body of official representatives and its beliefs and doctrines. But the personalized nature of the reference is unmistakable. There are numerous references to Christianity in this discussion: the Creator in heaven, *νωθεν τοά δημιουργοά*, our (Christian) doctrine, *των μετηραν παιδειαν*, our Christian faith, *των τοά μετηρου λαγου*.⁵² These things are at odds with astrology. But Psellos draws a circle around those who enforce prohibition; he appears to single out specific individuals rather than the church per se. The covert implication is that these individuals are the ones at fault rather than the organization they

Xiphilinos, referred to above, give some indication of the constant pressure and possible threat faced by intellectuals in the preceding century.

50 Psellos, *Orationes forenses et acta*, Ed. George T. Dennis:

No. 1, *πρᾶς των σῆνοδον κατηγορία τοά ρχιερῆως*, pp. 1–104. It is, indeed, amusing to see Psellos lambasting the Patriarch for all the things he himself took great interest in, but the document is a riveting read as he describes in great detail the 'Chaldaean' and 'Hellenic' practices of the accused, much of which centred on Delphic-type divinatory rituals. For a taster, and for references to all the Patriarch's companions in crime, see L 106–223.

51 L.G. Westerink, *Texts and Studies in Neoplatonism and Byzantine Literature* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1980). See the first article, 'Proclus, Procopius, Psellos', pp. 1–6. See also Kurtz and Drexler, *Scripta Minora*, Vol. 1, pp. 361–71, esp. 371: *Τοά αάτοά, ὡτε παρητεσάτο των τοά πρωτοασηκρέτις ξιαν*.

52 *Chron.* Bk.6A.11–12.

represent. Like many before and many after him, Psellos was grappling with the dilemma of managing his dissent against the society which nurtured him.

If, in spite of this prohibition, emperors and would-be emperors are consulting astrologers, what does this say about the hold of the official religion on its highest functionaries? What does it imply about the recourse to astrology at other levels of society by people whose activities were not subjected to the gaze of all around them night and day outside of the capital Constantinople and the major towns? These questions are more profitably dealt with if rigid labels and categories are avoided: the Orthodox on one side, the heretics on the other. Nor does it have to imply the collapse and ‘degeneracy of the official religion’.⁵³ If, like Richard Greenfield, we want to appreciate the diversity of religious and spiritual practises of any given society, and we do not have to fit all the evidence to prove that most Byzantines were Orthodox or deviant, then we gain a much richer picture of the ‘Byzantine world-view’.⁵⁴ If the emperor Constantine IX Monomachos could spend extraordinary sums on the building of the Church of St. George the Martyr and punish immediately those who spoke unjustly about the Lord, and in the next breath claim protection from harm as proclaimed by numerous soothsayers; if the empress Zoe could make prophecies with the aid of an image of Jesus;⁵⁵ and if the Byzantines in general could mix their Orthodox Christianity with a myriad of other beliefs and practices (Balsamon’s twelfth-century commentary suggests that they did),⁵⁶ then maybe they were capable of transcending their mentality.⁵⁷

53 Kaldellis, *Argument*, Ch.16.

54 Richard Greenfield, ‘Sorcery and Politics at the Byzantine Court in the Twelfth Century: Interpretations of History’ in *The Making of Byzantine History*, ed. R. Beaton and C. Roueché, (London, 1993), [Hereafter Greenfield, ‘Sorcery and Politics ‘], Ch. 4, p. 75.

55 *Chron.* Bk.6.185 and Bk.6.167; Bk. 6.66.

56 Balsamon’s commentary is appended to the canons which prohibit pagan practices and heresy at the Council in Trullo, 691–92. See Rhalles and Potles, *Σηνταγμα τῶν θεῶν καὶ ἕρῶν κανόνων*, 6 vols., (Athens, 1852–1859; repr. 1966). For examples, see Canons 60–62, Vol. 2, p.440–49 dealing with, respectively: prophetic/oracular possession; categories of divination, including astrology; the celebration of pagan cult festivals. A useful summary is provided

If astrology was strongly discouraged in the public, institutional life of the empire, and pressed into subservient status by the church, yet Psellos gives some intimation that something very different pertained in one particular area of Byzantine life: centres of learning and higher education. In the fifth astrological episode in the *Chronographia*, Psellos delineates the skills and knowledge which are the mark of different subjects and how the experts in these subjects have a particular activity, or vocation, to pursue. Astrologers are put on the same par as orators, musicians, geometricians, philosophers, scientists, and opticians.⁵⁸ ‘Astrology’s monopoly on astronomical knowledge assured its serious investigation’,⁵⁹ and Anne Tihon’s survey of scientific and astronomical knowledge in the Byzantine empire, apart from noting that Psellos’s era was ‘an extraordinarily rich period’ for this activity, highlights the fact that astronomy, with an astrological component (the two words were synonymous in meaning), remained an integral part of the quadrivium.⁶⁰ Comprising arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy, together with the subjects of the trivium, grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy (the variations listed in both categories are numerous), this formed the core of the education dispensed at Byzantium. Inherited from classical times, it would be expected that all those who aspired to a position in the institutional machinery of the empire would be trained in the ‘seven liberal arts’.⁶¹ Psellos also confirms the astronomical component in his

by Frank R. Trombley, ‘The Council in Trullo (691–92): A Study of the Canons Relating to Paganism, Heresy, and the Invasions’, *Comitatus*, 9, 1978, pp. 1–18.

57 Cyril Mango, ‘Diabolus Byzantinus’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no. 46, 1992, p. 221: ‘Granted that the Byzantines could not transcend their mentality...’

58 *Chron.* Bk. 7C.4.

59 A. P. Kazhdan and A. W. Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 150.

60 Anne Tihon, ‘Enseignement scientifique à Byzance’ in *Etudes d’astronomie Byzantine* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), [Hereafter Tihon, ‘Enseignement scientifique à Byzance’], pp. 89–108.

61 Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (London: Fontana, 1987), p. 87.

intellectual autobiography in the *Chronographia*.⁶² The teaching of astrology may not have ‘gone beyond an elementary level in practical application’ in these teaching establishments,⁶³ but the students would have been exposed to a body of knowledge whose history and tradition stretched back into archaic times. One can appreciate how intellectuals in the cast of Psellos and Anna Komnena must have experienced a considerable tension when confronted with astrology in these educational contexts, which had to be squared with ecclesiastical censure and opposition. Psellos’ discourse on subject specialization gives a clear intimation of a ‘respectable’ astrology underpinned by an antique tradition, taking its place alongside other branches of knowledge. Psellos’ comments on astrology in this chapter are related in such a matter-of-fact way it may well have raised questions in the minds of some alert readers given the treatment of astrology earlier in the book.

It is also interesting that Psellos refers to those who studied astrology as ‘distinguished men’, οἱ ἀριστοὶ. The study of astrology by distinguished men places the subject at a far remove from the world of the fortune-teller who plied his trade at the Hippodrome, a group of people famously ridiculed by the Roman satirist, Juvenal.⁶⁴ Once again we find the use of apparently innocuous words and phrases by Psellos which appear to send signals to the attentive reader that point towards a positive picture of astrology.

Psellos testifies to a keen interest shown in astrology by many people to the extent that he could not avoid being questioned about it.⁶⁵ In the same breath he refers to the variety of the people who questioned him and, by extension, the variety of questions he had to deal with. This situation provided a personal spur to the author for, as a result, he was drawn to study all the sciences (πᾶσαν πιστέμην

62 *Chron.* Bk. 6.39: τι τε μουσικος καὶ στρονομικος νδιδοᾶς λάγοις.

63 Paul Lemerle, *Byzantine Humanism*, trans. by Helen Lindsay and Ann Moffat (Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1986), p. 169.

64 Juvenal, *Satire*, VI, L 582–91, from the Loeb translation by G. G. Ramsay, *Juvenal and Persius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969) (first published 1918).

65 *Chron.* Bk. 6A.11.

προεγαγεν).⁶⁶ We also learn that there were many books on the subject to fuel this interest, books Psellos had rejected (i.e. he read them first) as part of his defence against the rumours of his predictive capacities.⁶⁷

Inevitably, these reflections would stir the modern astrologer and historian to wonder how common it was to seek astrological advice. For this purpose, the rebel Bardas Phocas found it easier to have astrologers in his retinue (το ς περ' ἀτᾶν...μ ντεσιν).⁶⁸ Such a relationship is also hinted at with regard to the astrologers consulted by emperor Michael V. In moving to expel the empress Zoe, the emperor's counsellors suggest various advice, including astrological advice from the astrologers (τῶν στρονομοῦντων).⁶⁹ Robert Hand has spoken recently about the roles of astrologers in medieval Europe, and in particular the court astrologer whose duty it was to select a moment for commencing a battle and to predict its likely outcome; Psellos certainly gives a flavour of this.⁷⁰ Unfortunately, Psellos does not elaborate on the variety of people who asked him astrological questions, and the astrological episodes we have analyzed are concerned with the use made of it by emperors. Psellos was in the employ of successive emperors and he moved within imperial circles. However, an important piece of information suggests that Psellos may well have conducted astrological consultations with people who were not exclusively drawn from these well-to-do social circles: 'Of this (my teaching) I gave to all, without demanding money for my lessons; in fact, I even gave money to those who were keen to receive these lessons.'⁷¹ 'I am prepared to answer all your questions and I have opened doors to the sciences and all the arts',⁷²

66 Ibid., Bk. 6A.11, L4.

67 Ibid., Bk. 6A.10, L12–13.

68 Ibid., Bk. 1.15.

69 Ibid., Bk. 5.18.

70 Robert Hand, 'Modern Astrology as Viewed by Guido Bonatti', talk delivered at the 34th Annual Conference of the Astrological Association of Great Britain, September, 6–8, 2002.

71 *Chron.* Bk. 6.43.

said Psellos, and, where before the variety of questions reflected the variety of questioners, perhaps here the all-inclusive invitation reflected the all-inclusive nature of his audience.

We can surmise that the general populace placed a high store on what astrologers had to say judging from the widespread legend that circulated concerning Constantine IX's good fortune—*λήγητο γοάν παρ πολλοῖς*.⁷³ And Constantine himself, 'whenever he spoke gravely of certain prophecies and auguries concerning his reign, recalled some visions and strange dreams, some which he saw himself, others which he heard from the soothsayers...'⁷⁴ And further, 'the people were convinced he had learnt the outcome of events from some superior power'.⁷⁵ And, of course, the author was confronted with strong rumours concerning his own predictive ability at the time of emperor Monomachos' death.

Astrology fitted into everyday life and routine in a world where 'the supernatural existed in a very real and familiar sense' and this 'other world continually impinged upon everyday life'.⁷⁶ In the modern day astrology has been marginalised and trivialised and its public manifestation is the equivalent of the Hippodrome fortune-teller, but Psellos offers a variety of indications that astrology is taken very seriously, whether it be in the description of rumours about it, the employment of court astrologers, its study by distinguished men, or the

72 Michael Psellos, 'To Students who did not come to school because it was raining', ed. M. J. Kyriakis, 'Student Life in Eleventh-Century Constantinople', *Byzantina* 7 (1975), p. 383, L 72–74. An edition also appears in Psellos, *De Op. Daem.* pp. 135–40. See on this theme the article by Kurt Von Fritz, 'The Philosophical Passage in the Seventh Platonic Letter and the problem of Plato's 'esoteric' philosophy', in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, Vol. 1, eds. John P. Anton and George L. Kustas, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971), pp. 408–47: 'Socrates, according to the testimony of all his disciples, conversed at all times and in all places—in the marketplace, in the gymnasia, in the homes of friends and acquaintances—with everyone who wished to engage in conversation with him, on any and every subject...'

73 *Chron.* Bk. 6.96.

74 *Ibid.*

75 *Ibid.*, Bk. 6.97, L26–29.

76 Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (Phoenix, 1980), p. 151.

opposition it aroused from the church. And, apparently, the heated discussion it provoked: ‘That said, however, I am not persuaded that our affairs are dictated by the movement of the stars. But this issue, since it contains many controversies on either side, must be left for another examination.’⁷⁷ True to form, Psellos added a qualification immediately after his initial repudiation, when he pauses to say ‘but this issue...’. We learn also that there were groups arguing for and against astrology in Psellos’ time and the author insists he cannot do justice to the issues raised within the framework of the *Chronographia*. Alexander Kazhdan has drawn attention to the fact that Byzantine writers, historians, and chroniclers of the twelfth century were much concerned with the problem of fate, free will, and astrology; Psellos indicates that this debate was raging in the preceding century as well.⁷⁸ He may even be airing the views of one of these groups when he attacks ‘those who tell us there is a spiritual life and then point its direction towards new gods. These people divide our human life; they say life is generated and comes down solely from the Creator above, but they also conceive of the stars, which have no reason, as living beings...’⁷⁹ This statement has added interest in that it forces Psellos to contradict Plato, who, in the *Timaeus*, elevated the planets to the rank of celestial divinities.⁸⁰ If this group were advocating some sort of astral cult, then they could also call on the witness of the *Epinomis* (although of more doubtful Platonic authorship) to side with them against Psellos.⁸¹

The modern-day astrologer also gains some insight into contemporary methods and practice. For example, the astrologers around Bardas Phocas who carried out animal sacrifices must have combined

⁷⁷ *Chron.* Bk. 5.19.

⁷⁸ Alexander Kazhdan, *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). See Ch. 4, Eustathios of Thessalonica: the Life and opinions of a Twelfth Century Byzantine Rhetor, esp. pp. 178–83.

⁷⁹ *Chron.* Bk. 6A.11.

⁸⁰ Plato, *Tim.* 40A–D, trans. Donald J. Zeyl, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000); see also Zeyl’s introduction, p. li.

⁸¹ Plato (?), *Ep.* 983E, trans. A. E. Taylor, (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1972).

astrological prognostication with other forms of divination. Divining from the entrails, and especially the liver, of sacrificial animals, haruspicy, was a traditional method of divination practised in Hellenistic and Roman times, and we appear to have a description of this in Psellos' text.⁸² That such a method of divination had survived and was utilized by Byzantine astrologers is of some interest, for it is in this period also that the Byzantine reception of Arabic astrology is beginning to manifest itself, a curious blend of the 'old' and the 'new'.⁸³

Psellos also appears to describe a typical astrological consultation of his time. After all the relevant celestial phenomena were observed, 'predictions were then given to those who posed questions (wished to know) concerning the things they asked about'.⁸⁴ What is particularly interesting is that Psellos gives strong indications that the astrologers of his time, like his modern counterparts, were guided by a set of rules and strictures which determined whether the matter enquired about was fit for judgement. The astrologers consulted by Michael V, for example, checked 'the critical times' of the planets, τᾶν κριτῶν κρῖσιον. Their fearfulness of the matter reflects the caution a modern astrologer would observe when confronted, for example, with a Via Combusta Moon in a Horary question (Eroteisis), when the Moon is between the last fifteen degrees of Libra and the first fifteen degrees of Scorpio. The mastery of astrological techniques displayed by Psellos offered a picture of the complexity and richness of Byzantine horoscopy; Byzantine astrologers made routine use of triplicities, terms, decans, and dodecatemoria, and Psellos adds a considerable number of other considerations, the vast majority of which can be traced all the way back to Ptolemy's

82 See Plato, *Tim.* 71 A–D. Genesios, talking of the skills of the Persians in astronomy (astrology), refers to 'other methods of divination and prognostication' in addition to astrology. Genesios, *On the Reigns of the Emperors*, Bk. 3, Ch. 4.

83 Anne Tihon states that the oldest Byzantine text which shows a knowledge of Arabic astronomy was discovered by Prof. J. Mogenet; this is the scholia that appear in the margins of the *Almagest* in Vaticanus Graecus 1594, which were written in the year 1032. The anonymous author of the scholia refers to Arabic astronomers as the νεῦτεροι, the 'moderns'. Anne Tihon, 'L' astronomie Byzantine (Du Ve au XVe Siecle)' in *Etudes d'astronomie Byzantine* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), pp. 603–24.

84 *Chron.* Bk. 5.19.

Tetrabiblos. Many of these techniques have fallen out of use today. The greater the number of variables to consider would inevitably create that many more barriers to judgement; it suggests a caution and carefulness on the part of astrologers which the modern astrological community might want, at the very least, to re-acquaint themselves with.

We also gain some insight into the types of questions asked of the astrologers: the outcome of a military engagement (Phocas); the outcome of a devious plot (Michael V); assurances of a reign free from physical harm and bad fortune (Constantine IX Monomachos). Perhaps the most important and troubling questions, however, concerned the timing of one's death. The drama surrounding Psellos' adoption of the monastic life, the death of emperor Constantine IX Monomachos, and the delayed revelation of Psellos' possible foreknowledge of this event, disguise the fact that the prediction of the length of life was one of the most important things an astrologer could do:

The consideration of the length of life takes the leading place among enquiries about events following birth, for, as the ancients say, it is ridiculous to attach particular predictions to one who, by the constitution of the years of his life, will never attain at all to the time of the predicted events.⁸⁵

It is not surprising that Psellos was embarrassed by such rumours because the ability to predict someone's death would signify not just considerable skill, but highly advanced, superior expertise, as Ptolemy goes on to relate: 'This doctrine is no simple matter, nor unrelated to others, but in complex fashion derived from the domination of the places of greatest authority'.⁸⁶ Staying with the question of consultations, we observe a phenomenon which is all too familiar to many modern-day astrologers: the problem of the half-concealed, even dishonest, query:

...while hiding the nature of the deed he planned, he submitted a vague enquiry to the astrologers, proffering

85 Ptolemy, *Tetr.* Bk. 3, Ch. 10, (p. 271, Robbins):

86 Ibid.

this question only, whether the current heavenly aspects
did not obstruct the one who dared to do grand things.⁸⁷

Thus Michael V concealed his plans to attack the empress Zoe. Unbeknown to him and many others who pose such questions are the rules which guide astrologers, considered above, which help to indicate whether a chart is viable and worthy of judgement. More often than not, an astrologer can pick out a damaged question (and questioner), so that any obscurity is seen clearly, so to speak. The recasting of this interesting chart is denied us, however, for Psellos rarely provides accurate historical data in his work.⁸⁸

There is an element in all this of testing the mettle of the astrologer and a ready willingness to accuse him/her of being a charlatan if the questioner does not hear what he would like at the consultation, or if the astrologer is successfully duped with a trick question. The reactions of both Michael V and the rebel Bardas Phocas, who both contemptuously dismiss the warnings of the astrologers, show this dynamic at work; the former also dismissed astrology as a fraud (᾽ς ψευδοᾶς). Niketas Choniates referred to ‘those most baneful charlatans of astrology’ who ‘contended that they were wise, and able to foresee future events, and had foreknowledge of what lies ahead, and yet they could not see what was under their very noses’.⁸⁹ Psellos himself appears to trade on this

87 *Chron.* Bk. 5.20. See also Genesios, *On the Reigns of the Emperors*, Bk. 1, Ch. 6, where Bardanios refers his enquiry περιεσκεμμῆνως, ‘circumspectly’, to the prognosticating monk. See footnote 19 above for the text in full.

88 E. R. A. Sewter refers to Psellos’ weakness as a factual historian while Anthony Kaldellis adds that Psellos’ wider agenda may have led him to misrepresent or perhaps even to invent historical events. Sewter, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, Introduction, p. 15; Kaldellis, *Argument*, p. 12.

89 Chon. *Annals*, p. 124, 171; Van Dieten, Ch. 220–21, 310; Greek text in Maisano and Pontani, *Niceta Coniata*, Vol. 1, Bk. VIII. 7.1, L16–17, p. 500; Pontani, Vol. 2, Bk. X. 7.4, L39–42, p. 206. Choniates’ text makes obvious allusion to the apocryphal story of the pre-Socratic philosopher Thales, who was mocked for falling into a well while studying the heavens intently, so that his eagerness to know the heavens left him ignorant of what was around him. Genesios also relates how the emperor Michael I Rangabe (811–813) puts to the test the credentials of a female diviner. Genesios, *On the Reigns of the Emperors*, Bk. 1, Ch. 9.

aspect of astrology's reputation when he also, for his own purposes, contemptuously dismisses whatever Constantine IX Monomachos had to say about his prophetic abilities: '...and concerning this subject, he would say some amazing things...I attribute this phenomenon to a nonchalant and carefree disposition.'⁹⁰ Something of the credulity of many people with regard to astrology is strongly hinted at by Psellos:

...the majority of the people judge me worthy of more knowledge than I have naturally. Because I touched on geometry, they think that I am capable of measuring heaven; and since also I studied the phenomena of the celestial sphere, they insist that I cannot be ignorant of the phases...⁹¹

It is worth bearing in mind that even in the modern era it has been a relatively recent phenomena that has seen the gradual separation of the more serious approach to astrology as an art and craft from the populist manifestation that dominates its public image.⁹² It is doubtful that we can employ the terms 'populist' and 'serious' meaningfully to the astrology of Psellos' time, but we do know from the work of Richard Greenfield that all sorts of astrology came to be mixed with all sorts of other beliefs and practices, including magic, demonology, numerology, and alchemy.⁹³ Psellos himself gives an example of an unscrupulous use of divinatory practice when he criticizes the Naziraeen monks who deceitfully

⁹⁰ *Chron.* Bk. 6.96–97.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, Bk. 6A.10.

⁹² 'Return to Astrological Excellence' was the motto for the annual conference of the Astrological Association of Great Britain in 2002.

⁹³ Greenfield, 'Sorcery and Politics'. Although Greenfield's work, in this article and elsewhere, focuses primarily on magical practices and all sorts of related divinatory pursuits, his conclusions can be transferred verbatim to astrology: the fearfulness and caution of the practitioners involved; official disapproval and, in some cases, judicial trial of those practising, tempered by intellectual/philosophical curiosity in some learned circles; the huge groundswell of interest and practice by large swathes of the population.

predicted that the Empress Theodora would live forever;⁹⁴ Choniates also indicates the hysteria whipped up by the astrologers concerning a major planetary conjunction and its likely effects, so that Emperor Manuel Komnenos and his courtiers ‘sought caves and hollows as protection against the winds and prepared them for habitation; he removed the glass from the imperial buildings so that they should not be damaged by the blasts of the winds...’⁹⁵

Psellos points to other considerations which may have exacerbated this negative view of astrologers. He raises serious questions about the level of ability and competence of many practising astrologers, to the extent that the author himself had to help them to understand their science better:

These men concerned their minds little with the order and movement of the celestial sphere (they had not learnt beforehand how to demonstrate these things by the laws of geometry and, certainly, had no prior understanding of such things); but they confined themselves to setting up the angles (of a horoscope), then observing the risings and settings of the zodiac circle, and all other such phenomena connected with this, I mean to say, house rulers, the places of their aspects and their terms, together with all such things as make them more powerful, and all such things that weaken them....I proved to be very useful for many of those men in their understanding of the aspects of the planets.⁹⁶

In her survey of astronomical knowledge in Byzantium, Anne Tihon concluded that the work of Psellos in this area was not of a high level, making the telling observation that Psellos hardly ever quotes Ptolemy (*Psellos ne cite presque jamais Ptolémee*).⁹⁷ Tihon’s judgement is unfair

⁹⁴ *Chron.* Bk. 6A.18–19. The supreme irony of Psellos’ denunciation cannot escape our attention; it is precisely the sort of censure he was so careful to avoid when pursuing his astrological interests.

⁹⁵ Chon. *Annals*, p. 124; Van Dieten, Ch. 220–21.

⁹⁶ *Chron.* Bk. 5.19.

⁹⁷ Tihon, ‘Enseignement scientifique à Byzance’, p.99.

if the picture of a debased astrology described in the pages of Psellos is viewed from the heights reached in the period of Ptolemy's Alexandria. Psellos gives a check-list which would make up the curriculum for a modern-day beginners course. He tells us that the astrologers of his time concerned themselves with the basics of astrology and were content to remain at this 'beginners' level. It is, nevertheless, possible to do good astrology with these basic skills and the work involved should not be underestimated. An example from Psellos' checklist will illustrate this.

With regard to the aspects formed between the planets, even if one were to confine the work to the five basic aspects—conjunction, opposition, trine, sextile, and square, which are formed in degrees of longitude at 0°, 180°, 120°, 60°, and 90° respectively—an astrologer has to know how each planet works in different aspect to each of the other planets, which gives rise to a myriad of combinations, bearing in mind that more than two planets may be involved; to consider how the condition of the planet, taken from the sign it occupies or its elevation or otherwise in the chart, modifies the aspect; to consider whether the aspect is applying or separating and whether the aspect perfects early or late in the sign occupied; to observe whether the aspects are near one of the cardinal points of the chart or more cadent. This list of factors to consider could be extended by many other variables taken alone or in combination. One wonders what level of proficiency Tihon would find acceptable before passing a more favourable judgement on Psellos' abilities.

Bearing in mind that these astrologers were making 'predictions...to those who posed questions', including questions posed by emperors, it is right to expect that, in taking on this responsibility and setting themselves up as experts in the field, they should have advanced their astrological studies beyond the basic stage, and Psellos is right to point out their deficiency in this respect. Psellos, of course, is not motivated by twenty-first century ethics in highlighting their weaknesses. Rather, like his well-known 'revival of philosophy' proclamation, it gives him the opportunity to promote immoderately his achievements and his standing as the fount of all wisdom, including astrological wisdom:

...and if anyone should praise me, it should be because I drew my part of wisdom from no living current, but from sources which I found to be blocked up and which I had to open up and purify, for their springs lay hidden

in the depths and, with great efforts, I hauled them up to the surface.⁹⁸

This text could be transposed, word for word, to describe the state of astrology, although Anne Tihon dismisses Psellos' grand claims.

By contrast, Islamic astrologers and astronomers did concern themselves with geometrical and mathematical demonstrations—the adoption of a lunar calendar provided them with the imperative of understanding the moon's cycle—and this was one of the major criticisms Psellos levels against the astrologers.⁹⁹ Yet while Psellos makes frequent reference to the wisdom of the ancient Egyptians and Chaldaeans, nowhere in his published writings does he refer to, or admit of, any influence or learning, astrological or otherwise, as having been received from the contemporary 'barbarian' nations. We know from items of his correspondence that he had ample contact with these people, but he emphasizes that it was they who had everything to learn from him and who were in awe of his reputation:

We have made the Celts and the Arabs our captives, they have journeyed here from the other continent because of our fame. And as the Nile irrigated the land of Egypt, so my speeches have done the same for their souls. And if you know any Persians or Ethiopians, they will say that they know me and honour me and they have sought after me. And even now a man has arrived from the frontiers of Babylon to drink from my springs with wild enthusiasm.¹⁰⁰

The astrological episodes in the *Chronographia*, gripping in themselves, offer a fascinating snap-shot of Byzantine astrology in Psellos' period. It is a varied, multi-faceted picture revealing of Byzantine attitudes towards astrology and the ambiguous position astrology occupied in Byzantine

⁹⁸ *Chron.* Bk. 6.42.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, Bk. 5.19. See also David A. King, *Astronomy in the Service of Islam* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1993). Any one of a number of articles in this volume deals with the advances made by Islamic astronomers/astrologers in this area.

¹⁰⁰ Sathas, *Μεσ. Βιβ.*, Vol. 5, ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΑΙ, no. 207, πρᾶς τᾶν πατρι χην κάρ Μιχαῶλ τᾶν Κηρουλ ριον, p. 508.

society. Psellos' boastfulness has the accidental value of providing much information about the level and standard of astrological competence, and the inventory of astrological knowledge he lays claim to suggests a reasonable proficiency in astrological techniques, an estimate which would be revised considerably upwards if he did predict the Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos' death. There is much incidental information besides, on astrological methods (combined with sacrifices); on the relationships between astrologers and their clients (how astrologers were consulted); and on the public perception of astrologers (rumours of prophecies, accusations of fraud). The political historian would be intrigued to find the major luminaries of Byzantine history seeking out astrological advice, and the importance of these episodes in the Empire's history. The ecclesiastical historian might ponder the ideological and legal opposition of the church, in response to which Psellos devised a narrative method designed to distract the attention of the pious reader which enabled him to express a more positive, and therefore more subversive, view of the utility of astrology. If Psellos' denunciations of astrology are to be taken literally, as they might in the *Annals* of Niketas Choniates, it is bewildering to read his verdict on the predictions made by the distinguished men who studied astrology: ...and some of their responses were quite successful.¹⁰¹ How would Psellos know?

101 *Chron.* Bk. 5.19.