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## **Biagio Pelacani's Astrological History for the Year 1405**

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**Graziella Federici Vescovini**

*translated by Paola Brambilla*

**ABSTRACT:** The years between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were troubled by political conflicts and plots generated by an unbridled ambition for power. In those dark ages the figure of the astrologer stands out as a firm reference point in the shrewd and often merciless political game. Biagio Pelacani of Parma perfectly embodies this character of learned adviser. The actions of the powerful men of the time depended on his predictions.

In the Middle Ages, at the beginning of every new year, people at every level of society, from popes, kings and emperors, princes and lords to merchants, soldiers and peasants wondered what the following year would bring. They asked questions about famine and abundance, wars and plagues, peace and prosperity. We still ask the same questions except that the name of scourges has changed: they are no longer called pestilence, but the atom bomb, drugs and AIDS. The chief practitioner of this desire to know the future is the astrologer. Nowadays almanacs and horoscopes are addressed predominantly to individuals born under the signs of the Zodiac. In the past, though, the astrologers' clients were politicians and their concerns were political and economic. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, right up until the mid-17th century, the profession of the astrologer was highly respected. In universities such as Pavia, Milan, Bologna, Padua, Paris and Oxford,<sup>1</sup> astrology was a recognised discipline, together with mathematics, medicine and philosophy. It was considered a science, although 'mundane', earthly and not spiritual,<sup>2</sup> and was founded on philosophical principles in which celestial and terrestrial phenomena merged on the basis of a mutual exchange of cause and effect. Stars were believed not to cause events but to signify them, that is to explain their occurrence by anticipating them, without excluding human free will. Astrology's scholarly status and

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adaptation to Christianity under Albertus Magnus created a climate of thought in which famous scientists, philosophers, physicians and mathematicians compiled annual forecasts.

Many of these predictions have now been lost. But some of them, rather rare, are well preserved in dusty, centuries-old manuscripts and are still unpublished. These documents are very interesting for cultural historians, not only because they are episodes of a history of medieval and renaissance astrology yet to be written, but especially because they represent evidence of a widespread medieval world view. They are also unusual documentary sources of a particular period. Moreover, historians can always check the predictions against the record of events (supposing that it is possible to carry out a complete reconstruction of the events).

A 15th century manuscript kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris contains an interesting text, still unpublished, which comprises predictions concerning the year of grace 1405. It was compiled by Biagio Pelacani of Parma, an eminent Italian scientist and philosopher who enjoyed great fame in his time and in the following centuries; he was born in Parma (Costamenzana) around 1356 and died there in 1416. He studied in Pavia, lived in Paris, and then taught in the most important Italian centres of the time, Bologna, Padua, Florence, Piacenza. His fame as a scientist, mathematician, astronomer and student of optics spread rapidly during the years he was teaching. The work that is analysed here is a compilation of a world horoscope (*iudicium*) which presents an overview of the economic and political situation, city by city, of the year 1405.<sup>3</sup>

In Biagio's day, world horoscopes (*iudicia revolutionis*) were part of a literary genre which referred to a particular doctrinal context. When the 12th century work of the School of Toledo and Arab astrological texts of the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries began to be translated into Latin by Giovanni Ispano, Gerardo da Cremona, Platone di Tivoli, Abramo Savosarda (bar Hija), Ermanno di Carinzia (to mention only a few), the theory of the so-called world 'revolutions' started to spread in the Latin world. This genre was highly in demand and it was very common for the prince, the Lord of the city, the illustrious prelate (or a learned man for himself) to commission the most knowledgeable and famous astrologer of the time to compile a prediction of events at the beginning of each new year.

### **The Doctrine of Revolutions**

Such predictions were founded on specific cosmological, theological and philosophical theories, themselves based on a variety of philosophical and religious principles. Each set of predictions might have a different character depending on its ideological basis, whether Stoic, Neo-Platonic, Aristotelian, Christian, Hebraic or Muslim. They also assumed a universal conception of history in which important historical events such as the rise and fall of empires, the birth of religions and cultural transformation were marked by 'grand planetary revolutions'. In this sense the term 'revolution' referred to the cycles of Jupiter and Saturn as they revolved around the earth, and the relationships they formed to each other and other planets in the process. At the basis of all these treatises is then an astrological philosophy of history, and such pieces of work can be treated as 'astrological' histories of the world. As Eugenio Garin showed in his study of the etymology of the term 'revolution' which now has a political and cultural meaning, but originally had a distinctively astrological one.<sup>4</sup>

In addition it was believed that planetary influence related to the geographical location of the place under consideration as well as to the revolution of planets in that precise place (the movement in time), on the other. World revolutions were then compiled in relation to the geographical position (*climata*, or latitude<sup>5</sup>) of the major centres of the world. In other words, these essays describe the events of the most important cities of a particular year.

World horoscopes are part of the same astrological genre. The concept of world revolutions belongs to the interpretation of planetary influence which states that there are three different types of influence, depending on the quality and kind of the motions of the celestial bodies. Those motions determine also three different types of astrological history: the *universal* astrological history that explained the birth of the main religions, which was theorised in the treatises of the great conjunctions of Masha-allah<sup>6</sup> and of Albumasar (9th century); the *general* astrological history concerning the rise of large cities and of princes' dynasties, and the *individual* astrological history, of a Lord, a pope, a prince or a merchant. Right until the end of the 16th century the theoretical and philosophical discussion of these three types of influence or causality would engage many scientific and astronomical essayists. For example, in his commentary on Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*<sup>7</sup>, Girolamo Cardano discussed the priority of one type of influence over another: the general

is more important than the individual but less important than the universal. The problem concerned the character and scientific validity of the judgement (*iudicium*) in relation to the type of astrological influence, and Cardano denied the validity of personal judgements (*iudicia*) unless they were related to general ones.

In the previous centuries, the great physician and astrologer Pietro d'Abano (1256-c.1315) and Biagio Pelacani emphasised in addition the particular influence of the planets, without which it would have been impossible to compile an individual horoscope. Pelacani thus compiled a revolution that concerned general influence of planets both on cities and individuals, from which he drew general and personal forecasts for the year 1405.

### **Pelacani's Years in Pavia**

In 1405 Pelacani was teaching in Pavia. In 1403, the Duke of Milan, Gian Galeazzo Visconti, had called him to his studio to teach his favourite subjects: philosophy, mathematics, optics and astrology, a post he held until 1407.<sup>8</sup> Various chroniclers write that Biagio was highly respected by princes and lords for his predictions, and he acquired a reputation for infallibility.<sup>9</sup> In one episode recounted by Andrea de Radusio, Francesco Carrarese, Lord of Padua, consulted Biagio on his military enterprises against the people of Antonio della Scala.<sup>10</sup>

In 1407 Biagio left Pavia to return to Padua where he taught until 1411; there he enjoyed the protection and favours of the princes of Carrara, whose respect for astrology was such that they introduced it to the curriculum of Padua's Studio in the Statutes of 1399. Biagio had already taught there from 1384 to 1388, when he aroused a great deal of interest with his original theories of physics and logic and his doctrine on the human soul, denying its immortality. But in 1411 Padua was occupied by Venice and its princes lost their authority. By then, Biagio was old and tired. The cultural climate was also different and his classes were deserted, whereas Paolo Veneto and other masters started to gain ground. Biagio retired in Parma, the city where he was born, where he was appointed Prior of the College of Arts when the Studio was re-opened in 1412 until 1416, the year he died. A plaque on Parma's cathedral's facade is in memory of him.

### **Biagio's Revolution for 1405**

The *Iudicium revolutionis anni 1405*, dated 11 March, *secundum magistrum Blasium de Parma*, kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, has been perfectly preserved, unlike another world horoscope he wrote for the year 1386, of which only a fragmentary and intricate prologue remains.<sup>11</sup>

Biagio starts with an interesting theoretical prologue resembling that of a philosophical work (*iuxta formam et consuetudinem philosophantium*). By doing so he protects himself from accusations concerning some statements of his which could appear to conflict with the Catholic faith and the Holy Mother Church (*ad fidem catholicam et ad sanctam Matrem Ecclesiam*). In 1396 Biagio was in fact reprimanded by the Bishop of Pavia, who was also the Rector of the Studio, for what he had said against the Church. Biagio, who promptly asked for forgiveness, was reinstated in his post and salary<sup>1</sup>. He defends astrology from accusations of determinism, that is to say of denial of human freedom, by presenting a series of assertions and corollaries. All events are subject to the will of God (*nutu dei*). The rational being has a unique ability to resist the stars, and whoever acts out of their free will cannot be constrained. 'In whichever way the stars have influence, they do so because it is the will of God and they will influence in only one way and not otherwise. Anything that happens, in whichever way it may happen, will not happen if God does not want it to happen. Anything that happens in whichever way it might happen, can also not happen, considering likewise that it could happen. In whichever way the stars can influence, they do not or will not influence in such a way that the free will could be constrained. So, rational beings can resist the stars, if they wish. Those who state categorically that such people have the right to kill or should ever be killed are consequently to be reprimanded and condemned'.

Biagio then begins a detailed description of the world revolution of the year 1405. Following the Arab-Latin Ptolemaic astrological tradition of the Middle Ages, he starts the year on the spring or vernal equinox, when the Sun is at the first point of Aries, the first sign of the Zodiac. The text calculates that it falls on the 11th of March 1405. As is known, due to the precession of the equinoxes the correspondence between the zero degree of Aries and the equinoctial day has changed throughout the centuries.<sup>13</sup> But before starting his actual astrological discussion, Biagio introduces

the weather forecasts for the year ahead, on the basis of the then current theory of the larger or smaller forces of solar, lunar and planetary radiations. His forecasts for the new year include some drought, storms for boats on the sea (*agitatur mare, conquassantur navigia in aquis*) and a certain rise in the prices of wine, oil and wheat. As many people have persistently asked him if there will be plague and when would be the right moment to avoid such a horrible death, he declares that plague will affect only animals such as horses, mules and camels. But men will catch other illnesses which will corrode their colon and bones, so that many will die all the same and also from a leprosy epidemic. A large number of children will be born, many of whom will be illegitimate, but believed legitimate because fornication will be very common in that year (*Predicto anno erunt fornicationes quibus nascentur filii plures, quorum legitimi putabuntur quibus parum aut nihil proficient parentes*). These events will be influenced by celestial images associated with some important cities: Padua, governed by the sign of Scorpio; Venice, Mantua, Pavia and Treviso, governed by the sign of Pisces; Forlì, Ferrara, governed by Capricorn; Verona, Vicenza, Parma, Ancona, Bologna governed by Taurus; Piacenza governed by Mercury. Biagio talks about each one of these cities and will add some recommendations 'so that they can be better governed'. All predictions regarding the cities have been calculated by considering the position of the sun, on the first day of the year, with respect to the image (or sign) governing the city, and the position of the transiting moon, the Ascendant and the Midheaven, where it is possible to read the auspices of a city. Then he predicts the events of the year by distinguishing the first half of the year from the second half when the sun moves into the sign of Libra in September.

It is interesting to point out that the first city Biagio speaks of in this horoscope is Jerusalem. It takes on a universal meaning, it is the most important city of all, the first city of the world, because it is the holy city symbolising the Holy Mother Church. In this instance, the medieval idea of the Church, the celestial Jerusalem and the terrestrial Jerusalem all merge together.

But he forecasts nothing good for Jerusalem or the Church. On the contrary: disputes, wars and arguments among religious people. The beginning of the year will be marked by countless sword fights (*a principio anni astronomici bella, contentiones, vulnera cum percussionibus gladiatorum non parum*). But the situation will improve

later in the year: the divisions caused by the schism will fail and religion will generate admirable harmony and union, new decrees on divine and celestial matters will be written (*nova decreta fieri de caelestis tractantia et divinis*). As far as the emperor is concerned, the stars who designate him 'King of the Romans' confirm his presence in Italy accompanied by many warriors. The newly elected pope and emperor will consolidate their power, and also the Turks will conform to our faith (*poteris intueri maxime inter turcos se nostrae fidei conformare*). When the slowest planets, like Mars, but especially Jupiter and Saturn will be in aspect, there will be important developments for the Jewish religion (*secta iudeorum*). Whenever Jupiter and Saturn make harmonious aspects, the Jews will also live in harmony. The opposite will be true when and where there are conflicting aspects between these planets. As Biagio follows the methodology preferred by philosophers and logicians who study the universal first and then the individual, he continues his treatise by talking in general about kings and princes and other 'highly serene and illustrious' men, like dukes and marquises. He describes the kingdoms of Scotland, of England and France, and predicts whether they will be in harmony or disharmony on the basis of their geographical positions (*climata*). In particular, there will be friendship between the kings of the 'sixth climate' (France and Northern Italy) and those of the 'fifth climate' (the southern kingdoms).

Then Biagio reviews the events of the main Italian cities: from Pavia to Milan, which will be troubled by much tribulation, just like the city of Mantua. On the other hand, Rome, *caput Italiae et caput mundi*, governed by the sign of Leo, can apparently enjoy a prosperous time (*in felicitate frui habundanter*). However, as there will be an aspect of opposition with Rome, in the house of friendship, when the sun moves into the sign of Aries, harmony between the powerful and the people of the city will cease. And if there are any afflicted people, they will not be secular, but religious people.

Florence, *fortissima civitas*, governed by Mars in Aries, will experience two different periods: the first will be great (*peroptime se haberi*) without outrage, tribulation and similar evils. But in the second half of the year, that is to say from the month governed by Libra, there will be illnesses and many people will die. This will happen also in Pavia in the same period of time.

Bologna, where Biagio had taught during his early years from 1379 to 1382-84, is described with great fervour: *Bononia, mater studiorum*,



mercurial city, governed by the sign of Gemini according to some and by that of Taurus, according to others. Biagio, on this, doesn't take a clear-cut position: if under the sign of Taurus, it will be very afflicted, if under the sign of Gemini, it will not suffer plague or other illnesses.

The text goes on to predict the happy rule of Venice and of powerful Genoa, which he believes will have good events in the first half of the year and bad ones in the second half. This is the last city Biagio describes. Then, as previously announced, going from the most general to the individual, he draws the only personal forecast addressed to Facino Cane, for whom he predicts every possible good, which leads us to assume that he might have been the person who commissioned this work. 'About the magnificent, outstanding Signore Facino Cane' - Biagio writes - 'I won't cease to emphasise that he will happily triumph over his enemies. From the position of the Sun I also infer that Facino will invade the lands of his enemies and achieve victories over them', because 'if God is against our enemies, the stars will never be in favour of whoever has God against them'. Everything is thus good for Facino Cane even if some minor illness may disturb him at the end of the year.

The astrological text finishes with a lesson on how to elect the most appropriate time to start any endeavour in a profitable way. These techniques, developed in those treatises usually called *De electionibus* (Concerning Choices), introduce the principle of individual free choice in the context of stellar influence, rescuing human free will from celestial determinism. By placing this theory at the end of his world horoscope, Biagio confirms what he had stated at the beginning of the text, the principle of the freedom of human beings, who can escape stellar influence if they wish.

### **Conclusion**

Biagio was writing at the beginning of the 15th century. In a time troubled by constant warfare, grand political ambitions and vast conspiracies, the astrologer represented an important element in the political game. Not only does he give advice and suggest remedies both to avoid intrigues and prevent dangers, he also helps hatch plots against his patrons' foes and defeat their enemies. Not all astrologers who worked for the powerful were real scholars. Very few were actually as learned as Biagio Pelacani, especially in later centuries. As we know from his other works in mathematics, optics and philosophy (much more

famous than his treatise on the year 1405), he was definitely one of the great scholars of his day.

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12. On Biagio's denial of the soul's immortality, please refer to my work *Astrologia e scienza*, already mentioned, p.33 and chapter XI p. 369-408.
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