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The Ifriqiya Uprising Horoscope from *On Reception* by Masha'alla, Court Astrologer in the Early 'Abassid Caliphate

Chantal Allison

Introduction

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE, a mini-renaissance occurred in the West, spearheaded by translators and thinkers such as Adelard of Bath, Robert Grossteste and Roger Bacon. This renaissance was the result of the re-discovery of Greek learning, much of which was transmitted from Arabic texts. Many of our manuscripts from this and later periods abound with illustrious names from the Arab world. Although the books and treatises translated at this time covered a vast array of subjects; medicine, natural history, philosophy, engineering, magic, astronomy, the astrological world view pervades much of the literature, most obviously in the medical and astronomical texts. For the Medieval world, the influence of the heavens over earthly affairs was an indisputable fact of life, indeed it could be argued that the astrological world view, as propounded by Ptolemy and re-enforced by Aristotelianism, was central to medieval thought. Astrology was seen as the queen of all the sciences; the study of which provided a complete theoretical edifice - one could say a Unified Theory of the Universe - which enabled men and women to make sense of the world they lived in. A modern author tells us that it was the Greeks who 'took the [Babylonian] star-gazing and its magic and mumbo-jumbo and added philosophy, geometry and rational thought about themselves and their universe and produced the art of astrology'.¹ Although this erroneous view was penned in the twentieth century, it also reflects the prevailing medieval attitude to astrology in that many from that time also saw it as a rational system inherited from the Greeks.

The twelfth century intellectual flowering in the West was preceded by and depended upon an earlier flowering in the Islamic world (c 750 - 850 CE). This period saw the assimilation of ideas from Hellenic

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Alexandria, India and Persia into Arabic thought and it is primarily because of this intellectual activity that the eighth and ninth centuries are often seen as the golden age of Islam. Hitti comments: 'It was at this time that the Arabs not only assimilated the ancient lore of Persia and the classical heritage of Greece, but they adapted both to their own peculiar ways of thinking'.² The eighth century is of specific interest because Islam was not to feel the full impact of 'rational' Greek ways until the ninth century, when they completed their translations. By the mid seventh century, the whole of Arabia, part of the Persian (Sassanian) empire and the Syrian and Egyptian provinces of Byzantium had been conquered by the Arabs; the rest of the Sassanian lands were soon to follow. The empire was also expanding westwards, across the Maghrib (North Africa), reaching the Atlantic coast of Morocco by the end of the seventh century and crossing into Spain soon afterwards. At the eastern end of the empire, the lands beyond Khurasan were being conquered and the first Muslim advances into north-western India had been achieved. The 'Umayyad caliph, Mu'awiyah, (661-80) moved the capital of the new empire from Medina to Damascus in Syria. An established city, already sustaining a court, a government and an army, Damascus lay in a region from which the eastern Mediterranean and the coastal lands could be more easily controlled. The 'Umayyads not only introduced the Arabic language into their administration during this period, they also introduced an Islamic coinage and some of the great mosques were built under their regime. These factors were crucial for cementing an Islamic identity across the Mediterranean world and beyond.

However, this Damascene power base relied heavily on the good-will of the eastern governors in the Tigris and Euphrates - a good-will which was to evaporate under the perceived 'worldly ways' of their distant rulers. The eastern governors also viewed the 'Umayyads as being 'in sympathy' with the ways of Byzantium and the West. Later anti-'Umayyad historians re-enforced this view by describing them as 'a government directed towards worldly ends determined by self-interest' in contrast to 'the earlier caliphs who had been devoted to the well-being of religion'.³ The 'Umayyads were overthrown by the 'Abbasids, who were able to achieve this with support from the east. When they finally wrested power from the 'Umayyads in 750, they decided to shift their centre of operations eastwards, towards Persia. In 762, the early 'Abbasid caliph Al-Mansur, founded the great city of Baghdad on the west bank of the river Tigris. This break with the 'corrupt' past included

not only a geographical shift, but a shift towards Persian ways: 'The new location [Baghdad] opened the way for ideas from the East...Arab Islam succumbed to Persian influence...Gradually, Persian titles, Persian wines and wives, Persian mistresses, Persian songs as well as Persian ideas and thoughts, won the day.'⁴ The rise of the 'Abbasid dynasty, with its power base now located in the east, paved the way for the assimilation of Indo-Persian practices and sowed the seeds of the eighth century intellectual flowering in the Islamic world.

Masha'alla was an astronomer and astrologer working in the early 'Abbasid caliphate court in Baghdad. His writings provide an early example of how both the Alexandrian Greek and the Perso-Indian astrological traditions were assimilated into Islamic thought. This paper looks at a horoscope about an uprising in Ifriqiya he included in one of his works on interrogational astrology called '*On Reception*'. It has been chosen because there appear to be two independent accounts of the event in contemporary chronicles.

Astrology in Islam

*'Astrology is the meeting and confrontation point between the demands of a rational order, as in the Greek Sciences, and the myths and superstitions inherited from the East; between logic and magic, between mathematics and mythology, between Athens and Alexandria'*⁵

The Traditions

The early conquests achieved by the Arab 'Umayyads put them in touch with Western ways. For the intellectual movement, this primarily meant contact with Hellenistic Egypt and Byzantine thought. With the foundation of Baghdad, the heart of Islam's new 'Abbasid empire was now placed in the Tigris and Euphrates region, home to Sassanian traditions. Al-Mansur in particular is said to have been very impressed with this intellectual heritage and he began the trend of recruiting men from the local populations both to run his administration and to promote the cause of learning. This move allowed many local physicians and astrologers into the caliphal court, putting the Arab intellectuals and scientists in closer touch with Indian as well as Persian influences. Al-Harun Rashid, famous caliph of the *Arabian Nights*, also actively promoted this interest, an interest which was to continue well into the

ninth century under al-Mamun. All of this activity led to a huge effort in translating all the available sources within a short period of time.

Consequently, the Arab inheritance of astronomical and astrological ideas, even in the eighth century, already had a complex lineage. In simple terms it appears to have begun with the assimilation of ideas from Hellenistic Egypt when the 'Umayyads were in Damascus. Then, with the move eastwards, the assimilation of Indo-Persian ideas began. David Pingree, perhaps the most eminent historian of our times in this field, summarises it with the following words:

Astrology in Islam, like many other of the sciences, began in the late eighth century as an amalgam. Texts were translated into Arabic from Greek, Syriac, Pahlavi and Sanskrit - texts which had been invented in Hellenistic Egypt in the late second or early first century BC on the basis of Greek astronomy and physics with admixtures of elements from Babylonian celestial omens and Egyptian celestial demi-gods; that this Hellenistic astrology had been transmitted to India in the second century AD, and there transformed into a local re-interpretation of its original methods and goals; and finally that both the Greek and Indian variants of astrology had been received into Iran in the third century AD and fashioned into a new entity that we know of primarily through its reflections in Arabic astrology...⁶

Pingree also offers some categories which roughly equate the various traditions and their provenance:

1. Mesopotamian 'celestial omen reading', a very ancient practice which Pingree regards as a kind of proto-astrology.
2. Mundane (political) astrology, often used in the founding of cities. This includes the ancient Sassanian tradition of using the cycles of Jupiter and Saturn to interpret the great sweeps of history.
3. Genethliological (nativities), developed by the Hellenistic world but originated in late 5th century BCE Mesopotamia. The theory was based on several philosophical schools from the sixth century BCE which explored ideas about man's place in the cosmos.

4. Catarchic (electional) astrology, originated in the second century BCE, based on the Hermetic texts of Alexandria and Harran. This branch represented an amalgam of Greek and Indian traditions and determines the best time for commencing an activity, the time having been chosen from a number of candidate horoscopes.

5. Interrogations. This branch determines the answer to a question by consulting the horoscope for the time at which it was posed. Pingree distinguishes this from catarchic astrology in that interrogations are more like 'bidden' omens, whereas catarchic astrology is like 'unbidden' omens. Pingree remarks that Dorotheus in book five of his poem deals exclusively with catarchic rather than with interrogational astrology.⁷

Rather significantly, Pingree appears to offer an originator for all branches of astrology except interrogational. However, in his analysis of three Arabic and two Byzantine manuscripts which are copies of Masha'alla's *On Interrogations*, he provides some tantalising clues.⁹ One of these manuscripts, compiled in the fifteenth century, contains eleven horoscopes dated between 765 and 768.⁹ Pingree remarks: 'Except for political power, these are all topics derived from the catarchic aspect of Greek astrology in a tradition that began with Dorotheus of Sidon in the first century AD, was continued by Hephaestio of Thebes in the early fourth century, and culminated in the works of Masha'alla's older colleague at the 'Abbasid court, Theophilus of Edessa'.¹⁰ And although Pingree maintains that 'a substantial number of Masha'alla's chapters correspond to chapters in the...Pahlavi version of the *Carmen Astrologicum*,...some topics such as warfare and political power, Masha'alla shares with Theophilus material that the latter derived from his Sassanian sources'. However, Pingree does not appear to say which Sassanian sources these might be.

Theoretically, these two modes of astrology (electional and interrogational) should require different techniques, but Pingree says: 'Masha'alla and others frequently simply repeat the rules of catarchic astrology as if they were applicable to interrogations'.¹¹ Thus a chapter of Dorotheus on the sick, of which we have a prose paraphrase by Hephaestios, is catarchic, but appears as interrogational in the Pahlavi Dorotheus. The same is true of the chapters on thefts and on adversaries. Pingree concludes that the Greeks did not practice interrogations because 'The Indians invented it as an extension of divination, using the

techniques of [the Greek-derived] catarchic astrology'.¹² It is 'this form of astrology together with military astrology [that] entered Sassanian Iran together with genethliology and catarchic astrology from India in the third century...this Indo-Sassanian tradition influenced Theophilus of Edessa, Masha'alla...in eighth century Baghdad'.¹³

The Texts

The intellectuals of the early 'Abbasid caliphate had access to a number of important texts from these traditions. Some sources, particularly the Greek texts, had already been translated into Syriac under the 'Umayyad caliphs in Damascus. From the Indians came a series of sacred texts, the *Siddhantas*, which were key sources of astronomical and astrological ideas.¹⁴ The Indian texts also provided the important *Zij*, (or astronomical tables), used to compute the positions of the planets. The Alexandrine-Hellenic inheritance provided Ptolemy's astronomical treatise of the *Almagest*, but his astrological treatise, the *Tetrabiblos*, appears not to have become available in Arabic until the ninth century, and only then in apparently hurried and inferior translations.¹⁵ Another early Alexandrian text was Dorotheus of Sidon's *Carmen Astrologicum*. This was available to eighth century Islam only in a Pahlavi translation, although an early Arabic translation may have been made. This means that although the Arabs undoubtedly used Ptolemy to calculate horoscopes, they did not have proper access to the Ptolemaic astrology and so relied far more on Dorotheus for this aspect of the art.¹⁶

With the Arab conquests of Persia, almost all the literature of the Zoroastrian Sassanids was destroyed. However, the astrological traditions appear to have survived in works of Persian astrologers such as Masha'alla. These texts may hold important clues for the Western Medieval tradition. Robert Hand has this to say; 'While Arab astrology clearly owes a large debt to Hellenistic astrology, it is also clear that in the two or three centuries between the last Hellenistic astrologers and the first Arab era ones, something new had come into the stream. This.... probably was the Persian stream.... And Arab era astrology is the immediate ancestor of Western astrology..... Our astrology may be in fact the successor to that third stream of ancient astrologies'.¹⁷

The Life and Works of Masha'alla

As with most early figures, there is very little we know about Masha'alla's personal life. His name appears to us in a number of forms;

his Hebrew name is Manasse, or Misha; and his Persian name is Yazdan Khwast.¹⁸ The Latin West knew him as Messehalla. According to the Encyclopaedia of Islam, al-Nadim's *al-Fihrist* gives his period of activity from 754-5 to 813-33, and acknowledges his importance by describing him as the 'unique astrologer of his day'.¹⁹ We know that he was born into a Jewish family in Basrah, situated on the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Basrah was an established centre of learning, originally built as a garrison town by the 'Umayyads. Masha'alla lived into the reign of al-Mamun, which began in 813 and the year of his death cannot be ascertained for certain but it is generally believed he died around the year 820. Although the dates are not known, Masha'alla spent some time at Harran which contained a 'curious sect' of star-worshippers.²⁰ Harran, situated in what was once Northern Mesopotamia, is possibly one of the most ancient centres of star worship and learning. The remnant of this cult persisted through the centuries, and by Masha'alla's time, it was renowned throughout the Mediterranean world. When Harran fell to the 'Umayyads, 'Umar II arranged to have the famous Alexandrian medical school transferred there; presumably this is what drew Masha'alla there.²¹ The early 'Abbasid caliphs were also to set up an important school of translators there which Masha'alla undoubtedly had access to. He may even have had some involvement in its establishment.

Certainly by the 760s Masha'alla was a respected and able astrologer. It is during al-Mansur's reign that his name first appears in connection with the astrological deliberations that led to the founding of Baghdad on 30 July 762. 'The horoscope under which al-Mansur started the building of this military post.... proved fully auspicious as predicted by the court astrologer. In a few years the town grew into an emporium of trade and commerce and a political centre of the greatest international importance. As if called into existence by a magician's wand, this city..... attained a degree of prestige and splendour unrivalled in the Middle Ages, except perhaps by Constantinople'.²²

David Pingree describes Masha'alla as 'one of those early 'Abbasid astrologers who introduced the Sassanian version of the predictive art to the Arabs'.¹ Elsewhere, he says that Masha'alla is the 'most important figure in the early period for shaping an Islamic astrology out of the various traditions available'.²⁴ He was a prolific writer on astrology in Arabic between 760 and 810, relying on the Pahlavi version and perhaps the Arabic version of Dorotheus' *Carmen Astrologicum* for certain aspects. Masha'alla's primary influence in the West can be seen through

the activity of Abu Ma'shar, author of the *Greater Introduction*, a basic text used in the West for many hundreds of years.²⁵ This treatise contains the Persian 'Jupiter/Saturn cycle' tradition. Pierre d'Ailly, a contemporary of Christopher Columbus and a cardinal in the Catholic church, used exactly the same astrological techniques for composing a Christian version of a *History of the World*.²⁶ Abu Ma'shar was the outstanding astrologer of the Middle Ages, formulating the standard expression of Islamic astrological doctrine which was to become an important part of the intellectual heritage of the Medieval West.

Although very little of Masha'alla's extensive output has survived in its original language except in quotations included in later compilations, a fair amount remains available in Greek, Hebrew and Latin translations. The Dictionary of Scientific Biography lists twenty-eight works attributed to Masha'alla several of which contain horoscopes cast between 762 and 809.²⁷ The most significant works include *The Book of Nativities*, *On Conjunctions and Peoples and Religions* also known as *On Conjunctions, Religions and Communities*, *De scientia motus orbis*, also known as *De elementis et orbibus coelestibus*, and *On Reception*, containing horoscopes dated between 13 Feb 791 and 30 Nov 794.

The 'most noteworthy' of Masha'alla's texts are those devoted to astrological history, a science perfected in Sassanian Iran and one that was to become very popular in Islam; his principal work is *On Conjunctions, Religions and Communities*.²⁸ Written just before 813, this appears to be Masha'alla's culminating work. Kennedy and Pingree have shown it to be primarily influenced by the Persian astrological tradition, as it is an interpretation of Zoroastrian millenarianism in terms of the cycles of Jupiter and Saturn.²⁹ The other work in the same genre is *On the Rise of the Caliphs*, which was written shortly after 809 and which contains charts of the vernal equinoxes of the years in which the reign of each caliph down to Harun began.³⁰ It therefore seems that from the dating of these two treatises, Masha'alla discovered this tradition only later in life, perhaps in retirement. A major work written in the Greek tradition, is the *Book of Nativities*. It appears to be largely a copy of Dorotheus of Sidon's *Carmen Astrologicum*.³¹

An important work, *On Interrogations*, has already been discussed. The other related but lesser-known work is *On Receptions*, which contains ten interrogational horoscopes dated between 791 and 794. This little book not only covers the familiar Dorothean topics (illness, inheritances and the whereabouts and condition of possessions), it also

contains four horoscopes dealing with questions of political authority (kingship).³² The treatise is of particular interest because the methods, or rules of interpretation, are quite different from those described in Dorotheus, even for the so-called ‘Dorothean topics’.³³ Robert Hand, in his introduction to his recent translation of *On Reception* tells us that there is general agreement that the same person wrote *On Reception* both this and the *Book of Nativities*.¹ He contrasts the two very separate methods used in them by placing the *Book of Nativities* firmly in the Dorothean tradition and by describing *On Reception* as exemplifying the Arabic (or Persian) approach. But Hand, like Pingree, does not suggest Masha’ alla’s sources for his Arabic sources. This, it seems, is how the matter lies.

The Ifriqiya Uprising

The ‘Abbasid shift eastwards to Baghdad meant that the Western provinces in their turn, were far removed from the caliphal centre and inevitably these provinces would prove to be problematic. As late as 780, Spain and North Africa still did not fully acknowledge the new caliphate, indeed a remnant of the ‘Umayyad dynasty survived to retain control of Spain. Syria, home to Damascus, was also in constant turmoil. The Ifriqiya³⁴ uprising of 794, during Harun al-Rashid’s reign, is an example of the tensions of the time. Moreover, these events are of particular interest to historians of astrology, because not only do we have two independent accounts, we also have a horoscope from *On Reception* that seems to address the subject. The two accounts are from Ibn al-Athir (d 1255), and al-Tabari, writing in the 9th century. Although Ibn al-Athir is the later chronicler, he relates events leading up to the uprising:

In 177 (793 CE) al-Rashid made Fadl b. Rawh b. Hatim governor of Ifriqiya. When Rawh had died, Harun had appointed Habib b. Nasr al-Muhallabi, and Fadl then went to the Court and asked for the governorship. He was appointed and returned there arriving in [*the month of*] Muharram in 177. He appointed as his agent in Tunis his nephew Mughira b. Bisr b. Rawh, who was inexperienced and treated his army contemptuously. Fadl also had antagonised them and

¹ Robert Hand, ‘Introduction’ in Masha’allah, *On Reception*, trans. Robert Hand, (Reston, VA: ARHAT, 1998), pp. ii-viii (p. iii).

conducted himself badly with them, because of their preference for the previous governor, Nasr b. Habib [*sic*]. Those in Tunis now joined to write to him asking him to remove his nephew. He did not answer the letter, and they agreed together to rebel [...] and to choose ‘Abdallah b. Jarud, called ‘Abdawayh, as their leader [...]. At last they besieged Qayrawan, and the people opened the gates to them. Ibn Jarud and his army entered in Jumada 11, A.H. 178 (September 794). Fadl was driven out of Qayrawan, and they agreed to give him and those of his people with him safe conduct to Qabis. They set out, and Ibn Jarud turned against them, and killed Fadl b. Rawh. At this, a part of the army was angry, and joined together to fight ibn Jarud.³⁵

This chronicle tells us that on the death of his father Rawh in 793, Fadl took over the governorship of Ifriqiya. This was at a price however, because Harun had to remove Habib b. Nasr whom he had initially installed as the governor. Fadl, on gaining his new post, almost immediately made his nephew Mughira agent in Tunis, but for reasons unknown, Mughira mistreated the army. The army was already alienated because they preferred Habib, the ‘previous governor’, to Fadl. The Tunis faction wrote to Fadl asking him to get rid of Mughira and they rebelled when they received no reply. Ibn Jarud (also called ‘Abdawayh) was their rebel leader. The rebels caught up with Fadl in Qayrawan, and they overthrew him in September 794. Ibn Jarud agreed to give Fadl safe conduct to Qabis, but had him killed instead, causing a mutiny in part of the army.

Al-Tabari gives an account of subsequent events:

In Ifriqiya there were the uprisings of ‘Abdawayh al-Anbari and those of the army who followed him. Fadl b. Rawh b. Hatim [the governor] was killed, and those of the Muhallabi family who were there were driven out, so that al-Rashid sent Harthama b. A’yan there, and they returned to obedience. It is mentioned that this ‘Abdawayh, when he had overwhelmed Ifriqiya and deposed the governor there, became very important and many followed him. People from other areas came over to him. Harun’s vizir, Yahya b. Khalid b Barmak, sent Yaqtin b. Musa and Mansur b. Ziyad his secretary against him. Yayha b. Khalid kept sending ‘Abdawayh letters, desiring him to return to obedience and making him fearful of disobedience, with pleas arousing his

hopes, giving him assurances until he accepted a safe conduct, returned to obedience, and came to Baghdad. Yahya did all that he had promised for him and treated him well. He obtained security from al-Rashid for him, interceded for him and obtained a post for him.³⁶

Ibn Jarud ('Abdawayh), having overthrown Fadh, had been at first very popular and influential, this it seems in spite of the partial mutiny described by Ibn al-Athir. People from within and no doubt from nearby provinces supported him. In all likelihood, 'Abdawayh was becoming too powerful and this prompted Harun to urge him to 'return to obedience'. The province was in the West, far from central influence and this was always going to be a problem for the Caliphs in the East. In the end, the matter appears to be resolved when Harun sends Harthama, and 'Abdawayh is assured safe conduct back to Baghdad, with the promise of a post.

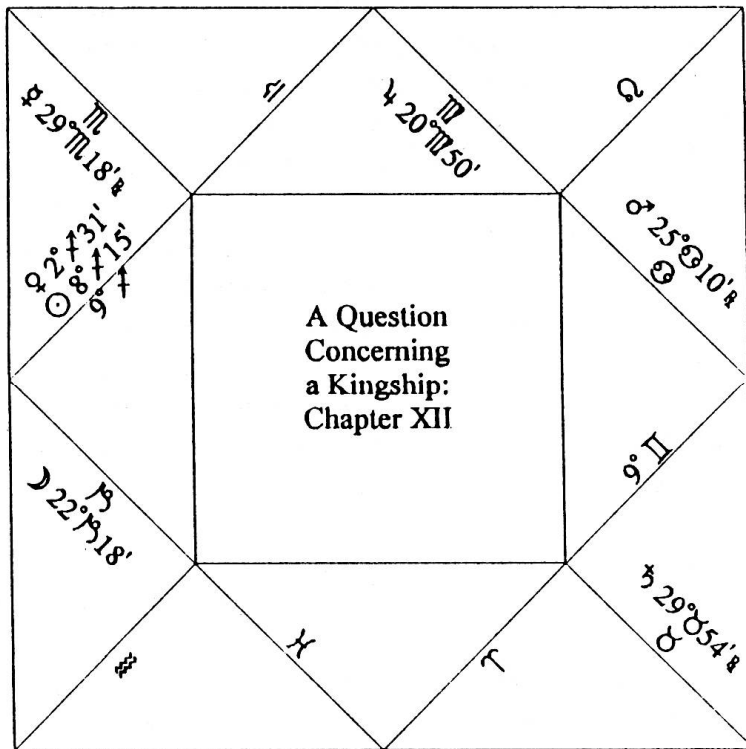
Harthama b. A'yan was an important figure at the caliphal court; he was a Khurasani and one-time governor thereof with 'close links to the magnates'.³⁷ He first appears during al-Mahdi's reign when he quashed a revolt led by Yusuf al-Barmi in his homeland of Khurasan (Oct 766 - Oct 777). Harthama is also said to have been involved in Yusuf's execution. He is mentioned in connection with another uprising which took place in Egypt, when he himself was governor of Palestine. He then became the caretaker governor of Egypt before Harun gave it to Abd al-Malik. We know that Harthama played a key role in ensuring Harun's caliphate having 'roused al-Rashid and had him invested with the caliphate.' There is also a tantalising reference to Harthama's early involvement with Ifriqiya; in the Year 170 (786 - 787 CE) al-Tabari informs us that Harthama was 'removed from Ifriqiya and brought back to Baghdad where Ja'far b. Yahya employed him as Deputy over the Guard'. Harthama achieved the senior post of Commander of the Guard in the Year 186 (802 CE).

But there are other stories from al-Tabari which speak of torture, night raids and other dark deeds. One suspects that Harthama, with his appointment to the Palace Guard, was quite willing to do the caliph's dirty work - perhaps he could be described as the medieval equivalent of a minder to the caliph. His unquestioning loyalty prevented him from scrutinising too closely the methods used to achieve an end. Indeed, Harun described him as his 'most reliable officer' and used him to destroy the Barmakids, a family who had consolidated enormous power

and influence during the previous caliphates. But for reasons that al-Tabari does not give, Harun turned against his most trusted servant just before he (Harun) died. From these brief but numerous references, we can build a picture of someone who was not only very close to the caliph, but who was also familiar with the local politics of the western provinces, with much valuable experience in the art of governorship.

The Horoscope

The chart for the Ifriqiya Uprising is one of ten interrogations to be found in Masha'alla's *On Reception*.³⁸ The chapter begins: 'Chapter XII - A Question Concerning a High Office. [This is] the interrogation of a certain duke whom the king of Africa put in place. The one who at that time had rulership over Africa was a rebel against them in opposition to them and was worthy of being deposed.'³⁹



The duke asked whether or not the appointment to the dukedom which the king had previously arranged would be given to him, and what would be the future of his status, and the status of the one who had rulership over the dukedom [at the time of the question]’.

Although al-Tabari does not give us precise dates, we can see from al-Athir’s account that Fadl had been murdered in September 794. Masha’alla’s horoscope was cast for 30 November 794, presumably time enough for news of the developments to get back to Baghdad. Could it be that Harthama sought Masha’alla’s advice in this matter after having been commanded to depose the rebel leader? We know that he was a particularly trusted servant with a good knowledge of provincial politics. He would therefore have been the logical choice to deal with and replace the rebellious ‘Abdawayh in a difficult and remote province. Harthama may have in any case been keen to obtain this governorship; having already had a previous involvement with Ifriqiya. Masha’alla locates the querent (Harthama) and his enemy (‘Abdawayh); the symbols put Harthama in a very strong position and ‘Abdawayh in a much weaker condition. The following could be a good description of Harthama, Harun’s loyal and upright servant:

Therefore, in this interrogation, I looked at the Ascendant and its Lord, and at the planet from which the Moon was separating...And the lord of the interrogation, Jupiter stood in the most dignified place of all the angles, namely, in the place of the elevation and kingship of the Lord of the interrogation. Also the Sun and Venus were being joined by Jupiter...and Jupiter received them with respect to his domicile, a strong reception. This, [with other factors] signified the strength of the lord of the interrogation over his enemy, the firmness of his honour and that he would obtain his kingship which would extend to that which had been promised to him by his commander...⁴⁰

Masha’alla then looks for his opponent, the rebel leader, ‘Abdawayh: ‘After this, for the one who had rulership in Africa who was reputed to be a contrary, disobedient rebel and the one who must be deposed, I examined according to the nadir, that is according to the opposition of the Ascendant, its lord, and according to the planet to which the Moon was being joined’. The sign on the nadir (descendant) is Gemini; so the primary significator for the opponent is Mercury, traditionally a trickster, one not to be trusted. Masha’alla finds Mercury backwards in

motion and cadent, being in the twelfth sign from the Ascendant. It was also making an opposition aspect to Saturn, which was also retrograde and cadent: this ‘.....signified loss of those things which Mercury, hostile and contrary, had entered, that is [he signified] the loss of his counsel, and the dissolution of his command.’ Mercury’s contact with Saturn signified ‘a falling into hostility and adversity, namely, a severe weakness, and the dispersion of his [the rebel’s] assembly, the downfall of his name and memory, and the loss and destruction of those things which he had appropriated and gathered unto himself...’⁴¹ This is an apt description of the rebel’s position. Although neither the chroniclers nor Masha’alla offer a reason for it, it is clear that ‘Abdawayh’s popularity was evaporating fast.’⁴²

Masha’alla then goes on to describe the state of the rebels’ army: ‘[Mars is] in the place of the [rebel’s] auxiliary troops, or of the soldiers of the one who was suspected of being a rebel, and the rebel’s substance.’ Mars is weak because it is setting, and the Moon is about to join with it by opposition, signifying ‘the dissolution of the work of that hostile and adverse person, his turning his back away from counsel which he had gone out of, his repentance concerning that which he had set in motion, his subjection, and the loss of his honour...’. The Moon in Capricorn signifies: ‘the seeking of the troops...for substance, namely their seeking of the fulfilment of their hope concerning the acquisition of the substance, and [it signified] that they would accept part of that which they had reckoned, according to the command of God, and that they would enter into obedience and support for the lord of the interrogation [the querent] after the acceptance of that concerning which they had hope, that is, after the grants were given which they were hoping they would receive’. But the opposition of the Moon in Capricorn to Mars in Cancer signified that they would not get all of that which they had hoped to receive or [that they would not get it] just as they had reckoned: ‘And the joining together of the Moon with Mars by opposition signified that the soldiers would be insolent adversaries in their seeking of substance, for this was their purpose, and this they sought...’.

Robert Hand offers a simplified explanation of this rather dense piece. He remarks: ‘in other words, the enemy’s troops had not been paid, and by paying them at least part of what they were owed, the querent would gain their allegiance’.⁴³ But the historical evidence seems to indicate that this is really about the bargaining position of the local

magnates who were presumably beginning to re-assess their alignment with 'Abdawayh.⁴⁴ 'Substance' could therefore be taken to be the grants he refers to; a reference to lands as a source of income.⁴⁵ It is more likely that Harthama would have to come to terms with the local magnates, rather than with the troops directly, and he would have to bargain territory or other tangible assets in return for their loyalty.

Masha'alla's next part of the interpretation offers a hint about the army rebellion the chronicle refers to: 'After this I examined for the one who was hostile and who opposed [the querent]. What would be his future with respect to his state of being and concerning the state of being of the one who followed after.' Masha'alla examined Mercury (which he had already shown to signify the rebels), and he found it making difficult aspects to Saturn. He concluded that

this signified that the enemy will come upon certain persons from among his brethren and his soldiers who are opposed to him, who would render unto him in turn, and they would renounce his word, that is, obedience to him.... After this I examined for that same opposing enemy [as to] what would be his strength and victory against those who were opposed to him...Therefore [certain factors], signified the victory of the opposing enemy over his own enemies, and that he would subject himself and take whatever they had of sovereignty into his own hands.

The 'opposing enemy' is 'Abdawayh and so 'those who were opposed to him' must be the rebellious faction of the army. It seems that things would end well for 'Abdawayh as far as this is concerned, although the chronicles are silent on this.

Masha'alla then takes the chart a step further; he wants to know if Harthama will get obtain control through peaceful or violent means - a crucial question if Harthama is to go properly prepared. 'Then I looked at what might be according to the lord of the interrogation and [according to] the enemy opposing, how the lord of the interrogation would obtain sovereignty and whether he would obtain it through battle or peace. And this signified that the attainment of the lord of the interrogation in those matters which he ruled, and his elevation over his enemy, would come about through peace and leniency, and that the enemy who was considered a rebel would seek security and peace.' From al-Tabari's account, we know that 'Abdawayh accepted safe conduct to Baghdad and with Yahya's blessing took up a post there, presumably destined to do no

further harm. Masha'alla's view also seems to be along these lines. As already stated, no doubt Masha'alla would have made it his business to keep in close touch with current affairs, and that this advice was therefore rooted in a good knowledge of the situation albeit coupled with an incisive astrological analysis.

Conclusion

Pingree's analysis of the development of interrogational astrology demonstrates the importance of the role of both the Indians in the third century and the Arabs in the eighth. It was the move eastwards that put the Arabs in touch with the Sassanian traditions, themselves inheritors of a complex lineage of political and interrogational astrology. However a dearth of Sassanian sources means that how these traditions were transmitted to the 'Abbasid court is not so clear. What is clear is that there were a number of astrologers from the local population who were regularly and frequently practicing a form of astrology not readily found in the Greek sources. Pingree identifies a number of branches of the art, categorising them alongside the various traditions. He places catarchic astrology firmly in the Hellenic, Dorothean mode and political astrology in the Sassanian tradition. Pingree has proposed that the Indians 'invented' interrogational astrology by merging their divinatory tradition with the Greek 'catarchic' tradition and that this amalgam entered Sassanian Iran in the third century. He then traces this influence to Theophilus of Edessa. Although this is a valuable analysis, Pingree himself admits that this is a simplified view of what is in reality a circular transmission, 'revolving back and forth' between the various traditions.⁴⁶ For instance, although the Indian tradition was unquestionably influenced by Greek ideas - they were in contact with each other since the time of the Alexandrian conquests - this is not to say that the Indians took these ideas on board uncritically. 'They altered, modified and quite possibly improved whatever they may have received from the West and combined it with their own native traditions'.⁴⁷

On Reception is a technical treatise which may either have been a teaching aid for students already steeped in astrology, or was prepared for posterity. In either case, it shows how interrogational astrology was practiced in eighth century Baghdad by a Persian astrologer. Pingree argues that 'the methods of Greek catarchic astrology were retained, while their application was diverted to a different purpose'.⁴⁸ In fact, *On Reception* clearly demonstrates that Masha'alla's methods are quite

different from those used in Book Five of *Carmen Astrologicum*, even though Masha'alla covers the so-called 'familiar Dorothean topics' in his book. J.D. North has shown that Masha'alla's *Book of Nativities* is largely a copy of Dorotheus, and perhaps because the 'Dorothean' topics appeared in *On Reception* Pingree thought that Masha'alla was also copying Dorotheus and therefore using his methods. More research into the Sassanian influences and how these might have operated in Masha'alla's practice is required. In particular, more work needs to be done on how these influences show up in Masha'alla's earlier work - *On Reception* was written about thirty years after *On Interrogation* – and a comparative study may shed some light on how Masha'alla's methods developed.⁴⁹ If it can be shown that Masha'alla used the Indian 'interrogational' techniques and applied them to the 'familiar Dorothean topics' he encountered in *Carmen*, then Masha'alla's true influence can be more accurately determined.

On Reception contains delightful examples of how Masha'alla uses reception to arrive at a judgement, illustrating the technical procedures of the astrology of the Islamic world. From the start, the strong reception the Sun and Venus make to Jupiter assures a good outcome for the querent. But Masha'alla also gives a judgement of the enemy's condition and the likely outcome for him. Perhaps most importantly, he gives Harthama crucial advice on what is probably the real reason for the question; whether Harthama would have to use peaceful or violent means to gain control of the province. The study of these examples, though, can help us gauge the accuracy of the translation from the Arabic into Latin, especially where the original Arabic manuscript has been lost as is the case with *On Reception*. More importantly, by understanding the *content* of a horoscope and how it is interpreted, we can flesh out and enhance our understanding of the chronicles and vice versa.⁵⁰ Most of all, understanding the role of astrology in the intrigues and manoeuvrings of court life adds a new dimension to our view of eighth century military and political history.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank Robert Hand for permission to use the horoscope 'A Question Concerning Kingship' from p 60 of *On Reception*, ARHAT 1998.

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2. Hitti, P.K. *History of the Arabs*, (10th edition), Macmillan Press (1970) (hereafter *Hitti, Arabs*), p.363.
3. Hourani, A., *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Faber and Faber, (1992), p.26.
4. Hitti, *Arabs*, p.294.
5. Garin, E. *Astrology in the Renaissance*_(English edition), Penguin-Arkana, (1983) p.xi, citing A.Warburg.
6. Pingree, D. transcript of lecture on Masha'alla delivered at Paris conference in 1993. p.1.
7. Pingree, D. 'Astrology', *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, pp.118-126, (ed) Wiener, P., New York: Schreiber (1973-4).
8. 'On Interrogations' is actually part of a larger work called *The Book Known as the Twenty-Seventh*. See Pingree, 'Masha'alla' in the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, Vol IX, pp.159-162, Coulston-Gillepsie (ed.), New York:Schreiber (1970)
9. These horoscopes predate by thirty years the horoscopes given in *On Reception*.
10. Pingree, Paris Conference Paper, p.6.
11. Pingree, Paris Conference Paper p.13.
12. Pingree, Paris Conference Paper pp.13-14. He qualifies this conclusion: 'this is clear from the similarities in some Sanskrit texts between the purification rituals followed by both diviners and practitioners of interrogational astrology.'
13. Pingree, Paris Conference Paper, p.14.

14. However, it should be noted that according to Dreyer, these writings were 'strongly influenced or simply borrowed from the Greek authors'. Dreyer, J.L.E. pp 240-1 *A History of Astronomy from Thales to Kepler*, 1906, (2nd edition, Dover Publications 1955), pp.240-1.
15. Masha'alla's colleague al-Tabari is credited with translating Dorotheus into Arabic and for a writing commentary on Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*. Al-Batriq translated *Tetrabiblos* for al-Tabari.
16. Dorotheus of Sidon, *Carmen Astrologicum*, trans. David Pingree, 2nd edition, Ascella Books, Nottingham 1993.
17. Hand, R., introduction to *The Astrological Record of the Early Sages in Greek*, trans. Robert Schmidt, The Golden Hind Press, Berkeley Springs, 1995, p xiv.
18. All biographical details are summarised in David Pingree's article on Masha'alla in the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*.
19. 'Masha'alla', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Volume 6, E.J. Brill (Leiden), English edition, (1974 -).
20. Hitti, P.K., *Arabs*, p.358.
21. 'Harran', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Volume 3.
22. Hitti, *Arabs*, p.293.
23. Pingree, D. 'Masha'alla', *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*.
24. Pingree, Paris Conference Paper, p.2.
25. See for instance, Richard Lemay's *Abu Ma'shar and Latin Aristotelianism in the Twelfth Century*, (American University of Beirut, Oriental series no 38, 1962), for an analysis of his influence on Medieval Western astrology.
26. Smoller, L.A. *History, Prophecy and the Stars*, Princeton University Press, (1994).
27. The list is compiled from that of al-Nadim given in his *Fihrist*, and is supplemented from F.J. Carmody's *Arabic Astronomical and Astrological Sciences in Latin Translation* (Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1956) and Lynn

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Thorndike's 'The Latin Translations of Astrological Works by Messahala' (*Osiris* 12, 1956, 49-72).

28. Pingree, Paris Conference Paper.

29. See Kennedy, E.S. & Pingree, D. *The Astrological History of Masha'alla*, Harvard University Press, (1971). In its original form, *On Conjunctions* predicted the downfall of the 'Abbasid dynasty and restoration of Iranian rule in 815. The article on Masha'alla in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Volume 6) remarks that this prediction casts Masha'alla in an anti-'Abbasid light, because it revealed his wish for the downfall of the caliphate and the restoration of Persian rule. However in 819, after several years of civil war between the caliph al-Mamun and his elder brother al-Amin, Baghdad was sacked and parts of it ruined (Hitti, *Arabs*, p.304). One wonders if Masha'alla lived to see these dark days.

30. Pingree, 'Historical Horoscopes', *Journal of American Oriental Society* LXXXII₂ (1962), pp.487-502.

31. See North, J.D. *Horoscopes in History*, Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts (1986).

32. Pingree, Paris Conference Paper.

33. Dorotheus' rules of interpretation are given in Book five of *Carmen Astrologicum*, translated by Pingree, D.

34. Ifriqiya was the north African province corresponding to modern Tunisia.

35. See Appendix A in J. A. Williams' translation of al-Tabari's chronicle *The Early 'Abbasi Empire*; Vol 2, Cambridge UP (1989). The appendix is an extract from Ibn al-Athir's chronicle and Williams cites the following reference: Ibn al-Athir, 'Izz al-Din (d1233), *al-Kamil fi al-Ta'rikh*, ed. C. Tornberg, Leiden, 1851-76, and Beirut, 1967.

36. Williams, p 208. Al-Tabari is writing about the Hijra Year 178, which is April 794 - March 795 CE. All quoted or summarised incidents about Harthama are also taken from this book.

37. *ibid*, n. 573.

38. The quotations are from Robert Hand's English translation of the Latin edition of Joachim Heller of Nuremberg of 1549. English edition published by

the Archive for the Retrieval of Historical Astrological Texts, (1998). See also the Appendix, which gives a photocopy of the English translation and the horoscope.

39. I.e. the rebel was in opposition to the duke and the king of Africa. Who this 'King of Africa' might be is a puzzle. The Latin is probably a rendering of the Arabic for 'sultan', but in a private communication with Dr Charles Burnett, I understand that the first Sultan of Qayrawan was not appointed until year 800, six years after these events. The most likely explanation is that John of Seville made an erroneous translation. In any case, it is more or less certain that Harthama had been promised the governership by a local ruler although it appears he continued to operate out of Baghdad, within Harun's sphere of influence.

40. Hand says '*ab imperatore suo*' could also be translated as 'emperor' but the person in question has already been called 'King', and 'commander' is the original meaning of '*imperator*'. But this may be a loose translation from the Arabic into the Latin; perhaps '*kingship*' should be 'governership' and '*commander*', 'sultan'.

41. Masha'alla seems to use the term 'detrimented' in terms of house rather than sign placement. For instance, Jupiter, although in Virgo (therefore detrimented by sign, at least according to Western tradition) is culminating, thus making Harthama's position very strong indeed. Note also the reference to Mars 'descensio' which could be translated as 'setting'. Contrasted with Jupiter's culmination, Mars is therefore in a much weaker position. It is even more interesting to note this in the light of the fact that Masha'alla appears to use rulerships by sign to effect his receptions.

42. It could be argued that Masha'alla would have made it his business to keep himself informed about such affairs, and that he was applying a little shrewd politics of his own. But equally, he was confirming the validity (or radicality) of the interrogation so that he would have confidence in his final judgements about the probable outcome.

43. Hand, *On Reception*, p.64, n.6.

44. The same placing of Mars could also refer to 'Abdawayh's allies (the local magnates), as well as to his armies. Also, assuming that 'troops' and 'soldiers' are a faithful rendering of the Latin, the Latin itself could be a loose translation of the Arabic. The next paragraph in the Masha'alla clearly covers the state of the rebellious army. This not only strengthens the argument, but also explains the apparent repetitiousness of the text.

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45. The Moon receives Saturn in Taurus which is like the grants of land; the means of 'buying' the army.

46. Pingree, D. 'Classical and Byzantine Astrology in Sassanian Persia', p 227. *Dunbarton Oaks Papers*, No 43 pp 227 - 229 (1989).

47. Hand, R., *Early Sages*, p.xiv.

48. Pingree, Paris Conference Paper, p.14.

49. Pingree tantalisingly tells us that Masha'alla's methods had indeed changed over the intervening thirty years. See Pingree, Paris Conference Paper, pp.12-13.

50. Pingree too sees the historic value in the political horoscopes in particular, precisely because they involve questions from people aspiring to political or military power.
