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Obituary

Richard Lemay: In memoriam

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Richard Lemay, the renowned historian of medieval astrology, died on 11 May 2004, at the age of 87. He was an indefatigable defender of the study of the history of astrology, often in the face of what he perceived to be narrow-mindedness and ignorance on the part of other academics. He sympathised most strongly with the ninth-century Arabic astrologer, Abu Ma'shar Ja'far ibn Muhammad ibn 'Umar of Balkh (in present-day Afghanistan), whose immense significance not only for the history of astrology, but also for the scientific and philosophical culture of the Middle Ages as a whole he was the first to adumbrate. To such an extent did he identify with Abu Ma'shar that, in later years, he took 'Albumasar' as his hotmail address. He resembled Abu Ma'shar also in his productivity, and in the fact that his greatest work was published very late in his life.

Abu Ma'shar (787-886 AD) passed most of his career in Baghdad at a time when that city was the most flourishing centre of intellectual activity West of China. Greek philosophy (especially that of Aristotle) was just being introduced into Arabic scholarship, and there was a lively debate between 'philosophers' (who espoused the methods of the new Greek philosophy) and 'mutakallimun', whose speculations were based on the Koran and the 'traditions' (*hadith*) of the Prophet. Abu Ma'shar was in the thick of these debates—in fact, he is said to have been a *hadith* scholar before being persuaded by al-Kindi, the foremost of the 'philosophers', to turn to the science of the stars. Abu Ma'shar lived at a time when the science of the stars could be regarded as the most elevated of the scientific disciplines. Numerous texts on the subject by him are extant in Arabic, of which the most important is his *Great Introduction to Astrology*. This work both brings together the astrological doctrines that Arabic scholars had inherited from the Greeks, Indians and the Persians, and gives scientific explanations for these doctrines, while justifying at length (in the first of its eight books) the validity and utility of the subject. Several of Abu Ma'shar's works were translated into Latin in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—often more than once, and they formed

the basis of Western scientific astrology. It was Lemay's achievement to have been the first scholar to realise the importance of the two Latin translations of the *Great Introduction to Astrology* for the development of physics (natural philosophy) in the West. His first book, which was the revision of a Columbia University thesis written under his revered teacher, Lynn Thorndike, was entitled 'Abu Ma'shar and Latin Aristotelianism in the Twelfth Century: The Recovery of Aristotle's Natural Philosophy through Arabic Astrology', and published in Beirut in 1962, while Lemay was teaching at the American University there (1958-65). The first part of the book was devoted to the *Great Introduction* itself, especially the elements of Aristotle's natural philosophy that it contained; the second part traced the influence of Aristotle's philosophy in Abu Ma'shar's *Great Introduction* on the leading philosophers of the twelfth century: Raymond of Marseilles, William of Conches, Hermann of Carinthia, Thierry of Chartres, and Daniel of Morley. All these philosophers wrote their works on cosmology before direct translations of Aristotle's works on natural philosophy had started to make an impact. It had never occurred to any scholar before Lemay that Aristotle, whose works became the curriculum of university teaching in the medieval West, should have become known first through an Arabic astrologer. But Lemay's arguments were convincing and his book soon established itself as a classic among studies of twelfth-century European culture.

One might claim that *Abu Ma'shar and Latin Aristotelianism* was an *apologia* for the study of astrology. For Lemay, at least, it cleared the way for introducing astrological texts directly. Over the next decades, as he moved from Beirut to Paris (as *attaché*, then *chargé de recherche* at the C.N.R.S., 1965-70) and eventually settled in New York as a Professor at the City College and the Graduate School of the City University (1970-86), he collected microfilms of manuscripts and prepared editions of a large number of astrological texts, in Arabic and their Latin translations: the *Liber Nemrod*, the *Centiloquium* attributed to Ptolemy, the *Liber Mamonis*, and the *De orbe* of Masha'allah, as well as the *Great Introduction* itself. In the course of preparing editions of these works he published seminal articles on their nature and the history of their transmission, as well as wide-ranging studies on topics common to several of these works, such as the transmission of Hindu-Arabic numerals, the biographies of the Arabic-Latin translators, and the positive and negative reactions to Arabic science in Europe (It is to be hoped that several of these articles will be published in the Collected Studies Series of Variorum Press). Of the editions themselves, only that of the *Great*

Introduction was published during his lifetime. But this in itself shows the immensity of Lemay's undertaking in the history of astrology. After 50 years of preparation it was published in nine volumes (of about 300 pages each), by the Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples (1995-1996). It consists of a volume of introductory material, two volumes devoted to the Arabic text (showing the original and revised version of Abu Ma'shar's text), three volumes of John of Seville's translation (also in an original and revised version), two volumes of Hermann of Carinthia's translation, and one volume of indexes. This was truly the work of a lifetime, and Lemay describes how the preparation of the edition followed the ups and downs of his personal life. Since it was published in his 75th year (just as Abu Ma'shar had completed *his* revision in his 89th year), one might have expected Lemay to have closed his books at this point. But not a bit of it! In his last years he made strenuous efforts to publish the other editions that he had been working on throughout his life. Sadly, he did not live long enough to see them published.

Lemay supported the study of the history of astrology in every way he could. He was especially generous to younger scholars, both as a supervisor of theses, and as a respondent to queries from all over the world. He was popular as a speaker at academic conferences and to astrological societies. His intense personal engagement in the subject resulted in a style of writing that sometimes upset other scholars, but it was always lively and imaginative. Perhaps he 'protested too much' in defending his astrological authorities. For, I think it is fair to say that the fact that nowadays academics no longer feel the need to apologise for studying astrology is in great measure due to the influence of his life and work. His papers will be donated to the University of South Carolina, where a "Richard Lemay Library" will be established.