CHAPTER SIX

THE SECRETS OF TIME: ASTROLOGY AND SACRED HISTORY

Not only the revelatory potential of experiential knowledge and the ontological dimensions of words belonged to the shared passions of medieval and early modern intellectuals; the search for the secret meaning of time and history is another example of discursive transfers. Until the late seventeenth century, it was astrology that served as the major disciplinary tool to unlock the hidden dimensions of past, present, and future. What is more, astrology is an important link between religious traditions on the one hand, and between cultural systems on the other. In fact, medieval and early modern astrology is much more closely related to mathematics, medicine, and philosophy of nature, than to what scholars have vaguely addressed as ‘occult sciences.’

In this chapter I will first give an overview of medieval Muslim astrology before I will turn to the Christian astrology of the same period, which can be described as an adaptation of Muslim traditions of knowledge, but which also reveals its own transmission and reworking of ancient doctrines leading to astonishing results already in the ninth century.

Critical Response to Ancient Traditions: Medieval Arabic Astrology

From the beginning, most Muslim rulers were open to science and philosophy. This led to a very fruitful transmission of ancient knowledge. What is more, the pre-Islamic traditions of Mesopotamia and Persia still had a considerable influence, which is revealed by the

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1 On the status of astrology in these historical contexts see Newman & Grafton, “Introduction.” On the notion of ‘occult sciences’ see also chapter 7 below.

2 For a more detailed description of medieval astrology, see particularly Boudet, Entre science et nigromance; see also Tester, History of Western Astrology, 98–201 (surprisingly, Tester deals with the Latin Middle Ages only, thus almost completely ignoring the Islamic influence); recently Campion, History of Western Astrology, vol. II, 19–84 (like Tester, Campion only engages the Christian contexts, briefly acknowledging the “distinguished achievements of the scholars of the Islamic world” [vol. II, xvii]); von Stuckrad, Geschichte der Astrologie, 159–206; see also Page, Astrology in Medieval Manuscripts.
continuing presence of alchemy, magic, and astrology, brought into new contexts in Islamic culture.\(^3\) When in 762 the Abbasids founded their new capital in Baghdad, they built the city gates in concordance with the four directions as an *imago mundi* ("image of the world"). As it was practice already in the Roman Empire, the founding date of the city was calculated in advance.\(^4\) The second center of Islamic culture was Spain (Arabic al-Andalus), where the Umayyads had founded the Emirate of Cordoba in 755. Subsequently, Cordoba became one of the most important European cultural centers of the Middle Ages.

Between the eighth and the tenth centuries, we witness an increase of scientific activity that not only integrated and translated Hellenistic and Eastern traditions of learning but also renewed theory, practice, and technology in many ways. Therefore, it is wrong to describe Islamic science and philosophy simply as a copy of Greek thinking. One of the most fervent critics of this 'classical narrative' is George Saliba. He makes clear that even

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\text{the translation movement of early Abbâsid times, since it was generated by social conditions of the Islamic government itself, did not simply translate the classical texts, digest them and then began to create a science of its own as the classical narrative continues to tell us. What seems to have happened is that the translation and creation were taking place at the same time [...] we can discern some creative activities to have preceded the translations of the advanced text, and that those creative activities by themselves required further translations in order to lead to more creative thinking and so on. In this manner we can understand why al-Hâjîj b. Matâr had to read Ptolemy’s text very carefully and to correct it whenever he thought it was in error.}\(^5\)
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\(^3\) Often, it has been argued that the Renaissance magic of a Marsilio Ficino and others is something entirely ‘new’; see particularly Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. Over against this simplified view, Frank Klaassen has demonstrated that Renaissance magic is built on medieval traditions; see Klaassen, “Medieval Ritual Magic in the Renaissance.” Arabic tradition plays a significant role in this transmission; see particularly Marquès-Rivière, *Amulettes, talismans et pentacles*; Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*; Burnett (ed.), *Magic and Divination in the Middle Ages*; Fanger (ed.), *Conjuring Spirits*; Weill-Parot, *Les “images astrologiques” au moyen âge*; Bremmer & Veenstra (eds.), *Metamorphosis of Magic*.

\(^4\) See von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie*, 149. The astrologer who calculated the date was Ma’shallâh (Latin Messallah), a Jew who had converted to Islam. With Jupiter as the ruler of the ‘birth chart’ of Baghdad, the Babylonian tutelary divinity Marduk merged with the highest god of Rome.