CHAPTER FOUR

MARTIANUS CAPELLA’S SYNOPSIS OF ASTRONOMY IN THE MARRIAGE OF PHILOLOGY AND MERCURY AND ITS MAJOR CAROLINGIAN COMMENTARIES

When John the Scot (Eriugena) wrote his commentary on the nine books of Capella’s *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (*The Marriage of Philology and Mercury; De nuptiis hereafter*), probably during the 850s, the astronomy of *De nuptiis* had come to be the leading authority in its discipline.1 Early in the century there appeared explicit references to and uses of Capellan astronomy, but these were few and paled in significance compared to the extent and frequency of use of Macrobian and Plinian astronomical materials at the time. We can point to at least three examples of limits in the use of the astronomical book (Book 8) of *De nuptiis* in the first quarter of the ninth century. First, the very spare selections from Capella compared to the fuller choices from Macrobius in the Seven Book Computus of 810–812 show the relative significance of these sources at the time.2 Second, the deluxe manuscript of the Aratea that dates perhaps to 816 contains in its final astronomical image a heliocentric pattern for the planets Mercury and Venus that clearly derived from Capella’s astronomy, but the configuration in which it resides represents a planetary design according to Pliny with Plinian texts inscribed on the planetary circles. There is no Capellan text of any sort inscribed on the heliocentric circles or anywhere else in this design from the second decade of the century.3 In short, an essentially


2 See above, pp. 88–89. Extended quotations from Macrobius appear in Bk. 6, Chs. 4–5; briefer and less precise uses of Capella’s text (from *De nuptiis* VIII, 860 and VI, 595–8) appear in the same chapters of the computus. King, “Investigation,” p. 72, remarked upon this contrast in the use of these sources.

3 See Leiden Voss. lat. Q.79, f. 93v, for the image in the Aratea. The image and its Plinian contents are briefly discussed above, pp. 146–8, also Figure 3.12. A fuller discussion of both the Plinian and Capellan contents of this design first appeared in Eastwood, “Origins and Contents of the Leiden Planetary Configuration,” pp. 4–23,
Plinian astronomical design carried a Capellan element anonymously, without discussion or explanation. The third example of limited use of Capellan astronomy early in the century appears in the absence of any reference to a pattern of circumsolar paths for Mercury and Venus by Dungal in his handling of Macrobius’s account of the appearances of Mercury and Venus with respect to the Sun. Dungal saw that account in terms of two possible orders of the planets, and both were fixed orders. He could have accommodated both a sub-solar and a supra-solar position for Mercury and Venus and thereby harmonized the Ciceronian and the Platonic planetary orders, had he adopted the pattern of Martianus Capella, but he did not, and he gave no sign of knowing about such a pattern. So it is reasonable to assume that in 811 Dungal knew nothing of Capella’s circumsolar design for the two planets. This certainly fits our understanding of the extent of Capellan influence in astronomy before ca. 825.

If positive Capellan influence is hard to find in the first quarter of the century, the manuscripts of De nuptiis provide further evidence. Of seventeen surviving manuscripts, with sixteen containing all nine books and one with a complete copy of Book 8 alone, only one manuscript is generally agreed to have been written as early as the second quarter of the century, while four come from the middle of the century, possibly earlier, and the rest are from the latter half. In other words, the work of Martianus Capella began to be copied widely only at or just before the middle of the century, and a dozen copies still survive from the second half of the ninth century.

1. The Capellan Allegory: Its Ramifications for Study of the Arts and Cosmology

The nine books of De nuptiis begin with two books seen as pedagogical allegory by many Carolingian readers. The characters of the allegory, Philology and Mercury, represented for ninth-century readers wisdom (sapientia) and eloquence (eloquentia), united in marriage to stand for the

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*reprinted, with a correction for the astronomical date presented in the planetary configuration, in idem, *The Revival of Planetary Astronomy*, ch. 4 (see also corrigenda).

* 4 See above, pp. 43–52.

* 5 I do not include here the two destroyed/usable Chartres ms. from the ninth century, nor do I consider the fragmentary ms. from the Kremsmünster Stiftsbibliothek, which has only a part of Book 8 alone and none of the planetary astronomy.