Despite the famous title of the book by Jean Seznec—“The survival of the Pagan Gods”—in the field of astrology there was indeed no survival of the ancient gods.¹ In the earlier Middle Ages there existed no veritable occupation concerning astrology until a new interest arose forcefully during the 12th century. It wasn’t until the 13th century that a new tradition of astrological imagery evolved based on the Latin translations of Arabic handbooks for this new “science”. But before following the line of this cultural development I would like to discuss the prominent part that the German scholar Aby Warburg played in the research of Renaissance astrology.

Aby Warburg and Astrology

The question of Astrology’s significance for Renaissance art is indissolubly bound to the name of Aby Warburg. He gave a key interpretation of the cryptic frescoes that had been uncovered in the early 19th century in a room of the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara. His speech at the Tenth International Conference of Art History in Rome in 1912 made him famous and had a formative influence on our idea of astrology-based iconographic programs, although the frescoes happened to be a particularly erudite special case.² We will thus turn now to these paintings and especially to Warburg’s role.

After the publication of his essays on Florentine painting (on early Netherlandish painters in Florence and on Francesco Sassetti) around


1908 Warburg began looking at astrological themes. He travelled to Rome in October to consult manuscripts in the Vatican Library. In his diary we find that he was particularly fascinated on this trip by the cupola mosaic of the Chigi chapel in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo, drawn by Raphael. The mosaic (Fig. 10.1) depicts God the Father in the Zenith as the one who, with a dramatic gesture, governs the motions of the heavens.

Fig. 10.1: Rome, S. Maria del Popolo, Raphael, Dome of the Chigi Chapel

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