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Abu Ma'shar : The Prince of Astrologers

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Abu Ma'shar: Prince of Astrologers

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The Persian astrologer Abu Ma'shar ¹(787-886 AD) had a profound effect on Western astrology and the modern-day student of the Western Predictive Tradition will be well rewarded by close study of his works and their influence.

This short article gives a brief overview of his work with the intention of indicating the influences that were brought to bear on Ma'shar and how they passed through his work and came to influence the West at a time when astrology was reaching to its zenith. It is hoped that students may be encouraged to deeper study in the full knowledge of the enormous importance of Ma'shar's works.

These works were first translated into Latin in the 12th century, being widely circulated in manuscript. Soon they were held, by leading Western astrologers, to be models of astrological practice. For instance, they provided the great 13th century astrologer Guido Bonatti with a major source for his *summa* of Medieval Astrology, the [Liber Astronomia](#) ² (c. 1282) that is today the main text for those studying Western Predictive Astrology, also known as Medieval Astrology. One can almost say that Abu Ma'shar standardised astrological practise for the medieval astrologer to which was added the input of Masha'allah (also, known as Messahala), Ptolemy, Dorotheus, and others. We also find that his

¹ Abu Ma'shar Ja'far ibn Muhammad ibn `Umar al-Balkhi

² see www.new-library.com/zoller/books

work influenced some of the major literary figures of Western culture, for example Wedel tells us that both Chaucer and Gower were familiar with Abu Ma'shar's works.³

Abu Ma'shar's astrological writings show the Hermetic influence on Arabic astrology. His works represent a fusion of [Sabian Hermeticism](#)⁴, Persian chronology, Islamic religious doctrine, Greek science, and Mesopotamian astrology. For example he, and his teacher [Alkindi](#), were instrumental in identifying the Antediluvian Prophet Idris with Enoch and Hermes.

³ Theodore Otto Wedel, **The Mediæval Attitude Toward Astrology Particularly in England**, New Haven: Yale University Library, 1920; Archon Books, 1968, pp 132, 134. See also pp 49-59, 62, 65-67, 72-3. To date, to my knowledge, only Abu Ma'shar's **The Abbreviation of the Introduction to Astrology** has been published edited and translated by Ch. Burnett, K. Yamamoto and M. Yano, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1994. A translation of the **Greater Introduction** is being prepared.

⁴ The Hermetic cult surviving in the Levant until c1100 called the Harranians (Sabians or Sabeans) were involved with a great deal more than astronomy and astrology. See Alkindi's [On the Stellar Rays](#), 3rd Edition, New Library, London, 2002 or in **The Muqaddimah** (1377), by Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), Pantheon Books, New York, 1958. Ibn Khaldun deals with magic (156-246) setting forth all that was known (or could be written) in his day. cf. Mas'udi. Chwolsohn, in **Ssabier Und Ssabianismus**, St Petersburg 1856 which is still regarded as authoritative on the Sabians. Also see Massignon, in **L'Astrologie et La Science Occulte**, Le R.P. Festugiere O.P., Paris, Librairie LeCoffre, J. Garabalda et Cie,

Editeurs, Troisieme Edition, 1950. Appendix III, *Inventaire de la Litterature Hermetique Arabe par Louis Massignon* which has much of interest. Also, cf. **The Fihirst** (c 987) of Ibn al-Nadim. It contains citations from **The Book Of The Five Mysteries** (exact date and authorship unknown), which purports to be a service book of Sabian religion. It declared that it was unlawful for a Sabian to declare his religion to a non-believer. It gives vesicles and responses repeated by the *kahin* (priest) and a congregation of youths.

Their religion was a Hellenised Babylonian religion in Neoplatonic garb underpinned by magic – which was for the more advanced a way of life. According to Shahrastani (1076-1153), they were "philosophers." To many contemporary Muslims they were "the Chaldaeans" or "the Chasdeans" (Heb. *Kasdim*). In the writings of the Medieval astrologers Abu Ma'shar and Messahalla, who drew their knowledge of Hermetic Astrology directly from contemporary Sabian sources, they are cited as "the ancients", "the Chaldaeans" and "the philosophers".

Ma'shar was an extremely successful practitioner who travelled throughout the East in the service of numerous Indian, Persian, Arab, and Egyptian chiefs of state. Though in the West, his reputation was mainly established by Peter of Abano when he wrote his 13th century **Conciliator Differentiarum Philosophorum Et Precipue Medicorum** (Diff. 156) in which he quoted the **Al-Mudsakaret** or (**Memorabilia**) of Abu Sa'id Schadsan, a student of Abu Ma'shar who recorded his teacher's answers and astrological deeds.

The **Memorabilia** - also known as the **Albumasar in Sadan**⁵ - is analysed by Lynn Thorndike in **Isis**⁶ and well worth reading, as it is a clear example of a medieval astrological hagiography. Indeed, it may prove to be the only example.

It portrays "the master" as a nearly omniscient wise man learned not only in the techniques of all branches of the Art of astrology but also in its traditional history with an awareness of the contributions of his predecessors. Interestingly passages in **Albumasar In Sadan**⁷ quote Ma'shar as saying that he follows Messahala's method of projecting rays and in other places admits to following other methods of Messahala (Masha'allah).

Not only did this community preserve much Hellenistic Hermetic astrology, they were also the major means by which both Hermetic-Nabatean magic and the Alchemical tradition was preserved. The famous statement of [Thabit ben Qurrah](#) (826-901) to the effect that they were the inheritors of classical paganism is exactly correct. See Thabit translation at <http://www.new-library.com/zoller/features> and DMA (see <http://www.new-library.com/zoller/courses>) lessons explaining Thabit's astronomy and Sabeanism .

Thabit ben Qurrah, Hermetic philosopher/priest and Sabian scientist was a contemporary of Hunain ibn Ishaq & Ishaq ibn Hunain. Al-Battani also a Sabian.

⁵ due to traditional corruptions of both men's names

⁶ 1954, pp. 22-32

⁷ p29 of **Isis** article.

Professor Richard Lemay has shown the central role played by Abu Ma'shar and his Latin translators in the transmission of Aristotelian philosophical teaching to the Christian West in the 12th century. Specifically, Lemay ⁸ has shown that Abu Ma'shar knew Aristotle's **De Generatione et Corruptione, Physica, De Caelo, Meteorologica** and **Metaphysica**. In addition, Ivry ⁹ shows that **Alkindi** adopted Aristotle's arguments (second hand) for contingent substances as found in the **Metaphysica** and **Physica** and that he knew **De Anima** ¹⁰.

Abu Ma'shar's astrological works are of the greatest importance for the history of astrology and from the practical point of view, for astrological technique.¹¹

⁸ **Abu Ma'shar and Latin Aristotelianism in the 12th Century**, American University of Beirut, Publications of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Oriental Series, no. 38.

⁹ **Al-Kindi's Metaphysics**, a translation of Ya`kûb ibn Ishâk al-Kindi's treatise "On First Philosophy" (fi al-Falsafah al-Ula), with Introduction and Commentary by Alfred L. Ivry, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1974, p.17-18.

¹⁰ p. 134, op. cit.

¹¹ One of his techniques, the "universal question" is a horary figure used as a natal in lieu of such when no reliable birth data exists. This was a technique of Abu Ma'shar's. He may have invented it. He certainly popularised it. Bonatti mentions it in **Liber Astronomiae, Tractatus Primus** at <http://www.new-library.com/zoller/books> and passim. I use it in modern practise today (2002).

The known astrological works of Abu Ma'shar are as follows:¹²

1. **The Greater Introduction to Astrology**¹³
2. **The Flores Astrologicae**¹⁴ (Flowers of Astrology)
3. **On the Great Conjunctions And on Revolutions of the World**
4. **On Revolutions of Nativities**¹⁵
5. **The Thousands**¹⁶

Pingree mentions two treatises by Abu Ma'shar on the subject of astrological history: **Kitab Al-Uluf** and **Kitab Al-Qiranat**. The first is number 5 in the list given above; the second is the Arabic title for number 3.

¹² For further discussion of Abu Ma'shar's works, see Thorndike **History of Magic and Experimental Science**, Columbia University Press, 1923, Vol I., p649-652. cf Richard Lemay, **Abu Ma'shar and Latin Aristotelianism in the 12th Century**, American University of Beirut, Publications of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Oriental Series, no. 38. Useful information relative to the tradition of Abu Ma'shar's works will be found in Jim Tester's, **A History of Western Astrology**, 1987, Boydell Press, p 152 n91. See also, same work, pp157-172, 181, 182, 206.

¹³ Translated by John of Spain (still unpublished according to **Thorndike History of Magic and Experimental Science**, NY: Columbia University Press, 1923, Vol. I., p649.) and by Hermann of Dalmatia.

¹⁴ Cited by Roger Bacon as severely criticizing physicians who do not study astrology.

¹⁵ There is some debate as to whether Abu Ma'shar, apart from writing the **On the Revolution of Nativities**, ascribed to him, was also the author of **Hermetis Philosophi De Revolutionibus nativitatum incerto interprete...** (bound with Proclus in **Claudii Ptolemaei quadripartium ennarator ignoti nominis Basiliae 1559**). The two works are on the same subject with similar names. One states Hermes as author. Abu Ma'shar himself frequently cites Hermes as an author.

¹⁶ See Prof. Kennedy's work in **Ithaca** pp 26-50 for the broad outlines of Abu Ma'shar's astrological theories in the **Kitab al-uluf**. This article was printed in: **Studies in Islamic Exact Sciences** by E.S.Kennedy, colleagues, and former students. Ed David King and Mary Helen Kennedy. Beirut. American University of Beirut. c 1983.

All of the above works are worthy of extensive consideration. As an illustration of this, we can look briefly at some aspects of his **Kitab al-Uluf** or **The Thousands**. This will be of especial interest to those of you who are using Mundane Astrology in your practise, as it forms the basis of the greater part of Ma'shar's mundane astrological theory and practice and contains some time measures hitherto unknown.

In the following, I am indebted to David E. Pingree's **The Thousands Of Abu Ma'shar**, Warburg Institute, London, 1968.

In his preface, Pingree observes that Abu Ma'shar's system of chronology in **The Thousands** is based upon the Sindhind tradition and is therefore drawn from Indian and Iranian sources. Pingree also observes that Abu Ma'shar's astrological history is of Sassanian origin. Pingree sees this as a deliberate corruption of the pristine Hermetic tradition. He regards it a "brazen imposture" intended to support the idea of the possibility of an astrological history and to enhance Abu Ma'shar's reputation as a great astrologer.

Abu Ma'shar builds his astrological history around the Great Deluge (the Biblical Flood), which he dates at midnight, Thursday - Friday, 17-18 February 3101 BC. This happens to be the beginning of the *Kali Yuga* according to the Hindus. Pingree tells us that this is no mistake as the both the Arabs and Persians had become familiar by Abu Ma'shar's day with the **Siddhantas** in which the entire system of Hindu chronology was contained. Thus, Abu Ma'shar, knowing the *Yuga* systems of the Hindus, calculated a grand conjunction of mean planets at 0 degrees Aries in 183,101 BC; 3101 BC; and in 176,899 AD thus showing that he was working with the "Great Year" of 360,000 solar years. This cycle appears in Ismaili sources and in the fourth century Sanskrit **Vishnupurana**, translated by H.H. Wilson Vasudeva Ainaपुरe, Bombay Saka 1824 (1902) 4.24,40-41; London 1840; reprinted 1961 Calcutta, p.391.

Abu Ma'shar acknowledges Indian sources for this chronology but argues that his system is superior because in it each planet moves an integer of degrees in 1000 years and because the length of a year is 365.259 days and 259 days is equal to what he presents as a minimum gestation period of the human foetus.¹⁷

He also employs a number of otherwise unheard of astrological periods, which are shown below merely to give an indication of his mundane astrology/astrological chronology:

I. Tasyirat (from tathir = effects; qessmah or qisma = division)

- a. mighty *qisma* = 1 degree moves along the equator in 1000 yrs
- b. big *qisma* = " " " " " " " " 100 yrs
- c. middle *qisma* = " " " " " " " " 10 yrs
- d. small *qisma* = " " " " " " " " 1 yr

II. Intiba (nature of the time)

- a. mighty *intiba* = 1 sign moves along the equator in 1000 yrs
- b. big *intiba* = " " " " " " " " 100 yrs
- c. middle *intiba* = " " " " " " " " 10 yrs
- d. small *intiba* = " " " " " " " " 1 yr

III. Fardar (Persian - corruption of the Greek meaning "period")

- a. mighty *fardar* = 360 solar years.
 - . each *fardar* is ruled by one sign and one planet. The series begins with Aries and Saturn and follows the order of the signs and the Chaldean Order of the planets.

¹⁷ The relation of the "Great Year", or even any astrological period at all, to the period of human gestation is a frequently met with trope in Hermetic and Neoplatonic literature. For matter of pre-conception see [Tools and Techniques of the Medieval Astrologer Part One](http://www.new-library.com/zoller/books) at <http://www.new-library.com/zoller/books>

b. big *fardar* = 78 years.

. allotted to the signs in an uneven manner:

Aries	12	Leo	8	Sagittarius	4
Taurus	11	Virgo	7	Capricorn	3
Gemini	10	Libra	6	Aquarius	2
Cancer	9	Scorpio	5	Pisces	1

The total is 78.

c. middle *fardar* = 75 years.

. each *fardar* is ruled by one of the seven planets or by one of the two lunar nodes in the order of their exaltation. Thus one cycle = $9 \times 75 = 675$ Years. The order being: Sun, Moon, North Node, Jupiter, Mercury, Saturn, South Node, Mars, Venus.

d. small *fardar*

. begin the attribution in a diurnal figure from the Sun; in a nocturnal figure from the Moon in the following order:

Sun (10), Venus(8), Mercury(13), Moon (9), Saturn (11), Jupiter (12), Mars (7), N.Node (3), S.Node (2), Sun....etc

This "small *fardar*" is the *firdaria* system found in Bonatti's **Liber Astronomiae** and other Medieval Latin works on astrology. This system and how to use is introduced in the [Foundation Course in Medieval Astrology](#)¹⁸ and more fully explored with in lessons on the *firdaria* and its use in prediction in the [Diploma Course in Medieval Astrology](#)¹⁹.

¹⁸ see <http://www.new-library.com/zoller/courses/>

¹⁹ Ibid

In conclusion, we may note that Abu Ma'shar was the archetypal astrologer. Not only did he advise kings, rajas, and caliphs in an Age when to make a false prediction could mean death, but he lived to instruct disciples. He exerted an influence on contemporary Muslim culture not only as an astrologer, but also as a philosopher who then later influenced the development of Western Science.

He and his teacher, Alkindi, were part of an Hermetic cabal which, having veiled itself in Koranic respectability by the fusion of Hermes and Enoch and by adding the prestige of *the* Greek natural philosopher Aristotle, created a philosophical overview of science and human endeavour that suggested that the way to Allah lay in studying His footsteps in Nature. This very overview became a cornerstone of Arabic science from the 9th -11th centuries. The Hermetic astrologer-magicians erected thereby a doctrinal edifice in which all the arts and sciences (including ethics, politics and economics) were subordinated to magic, alchemy, and astrology, which alone were subordinate to Allah Himself.

It was this unified cosmology ²⁰, which so entranced the Christian Crusaders when they encountered the Arab culture during the Crusades. In Europe it gave rise to Vincent of Beauvais's encyclopaedic **Speculum**. Perhaps it is fitting to then to end this article with the observation that part of the legacy of Ma'shar we may encounter in the heart of some of the greatest cities in the

²⁰ Indeed, it was this same cosmology that was the impetus behind the Neoplatonic spiritual vision of St Bonaventura ²⁰ (1221-1274). Bonaventura sets forth in his **Itinerarium mentis in Deum** and his **Reductio artium in Theologium** a theory of knowledge remarkably akin to that in the works of Alkindi and Abu Ma'shar and their circle in 9th century Baghdad. St Bonaventura (1221-1274), Franciscan. "The Seraphic Doctor." Professor of Theology at Paris. Created a cardinal by Gregory X. Venerated in his lifetime. Appears as saint in Dante's **Paradiso**. Canonized 1482. Made Doctor of the Church 1587.

Major works: **Itinerarium mentis in Deum; Reductio artium in Theologium; Biblia pauperum; Speculum Mariae Virginis; Breviloquium.**

world. For the **Speculum** was to be the literary prototype of the Gothic Cathedral. An encyclopaedia in stone dedicated to God in which through the choice and arrangement of the materials, as well as in the manner of ornamentation, especially the Rose window and freemasonry around the porches and entrances, all the arts and sciences known to medieval Man are portrayed for the public's edification. As such, the cathedral stands as a declaration of the Christianisation of the path of knowledge.²¹

This is the sister article to [Arabic Astrology](http://www.new-library.com/zoller/features) which can be found at <http://www.new-library.com/zoller/features>.

²¹ cf. **The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century** by Charles Homer Haskins, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927, pp 308-310.