Persian Conjunctions and the Origins of the Saturn Return

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I am often struck by the inherent complexity of a field like the history of astrology. What does it mean to look back in time at astrology—a subject notoriously concerned with the future? Furthermore, extracting the history of astrology from the history of religion, philosophy, science, mythology, literature, astronomy, or esotericism, is nearly impossible. Thus, as is perhaps fitting of any attempts to understand and explain an esoteric system such as astrology, we are already confused. But, as is also perhaps fitting of any esoteric tradition, the answers to our questions can be found within the tradition itself—but only through careful study and with great humility.

Contemporary astrology makes much use of the concept of the Saturn return, but the historical origins of the idea are largely unknown and certainly not to be found in the Western tradition. In the medieval period, astrology witnessed a pivotal revolution in the flourishing intellectual communities of high Islamic culture. Persian, Arab, and Jewish astrologers bestowed gifts upon the system that would forever alter it in theory and practice. Among the most prominent and enduring of these gifts was the theory of planetary cycles, which, although having embryonic beginnings in the most ancient astrological traditions, was refined and elaborated with careful attention and great prolificacy in the early medieval era. The understanding of the planet Saturn was especially affected by this intermingling of cultures, and it emerged as a key figure in the astrological tradition, commanding a mythic presence that would continue to inspire natural philosophers through the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Though the effects of the Scientific Revolution on the discipline of astrology are far too great to address here and now, the radical shift in cosmological orientation that accompanied the successive works of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton, among others, proved disastrous for astrology. What had once been recognized as an all-encompassing discipline that addressed exoteric concerns such as astronomical calculations and calendrical reckoning, as well as esoteric concerns such as the fate of a soul, astrology was within a mere few centuries

denigrated to a pseudoscience and believed to have had the sole purpose of predicting the future. Although the historical evidence, namely those texts that have been recovered, compiled, and translated into accessible languages, certainly suggests that astrology was largely concerned with predicting the future, the future as defined by ancient, medieval, and Renaissance astrologers looks very different from the progressive, linear future of the modern Western mind. The future as defined by most astrologers, past and present, looks a lot like a circle.

The radiating circular structure of the Ptolemaic cosmos lent itself neatly to a vision of time that was cyclical. Planetary alignments could be relied on to occur in set patterns at discernible times: each moment simultaneously unique and yet familiar. The future was not a vague and distant longing but rather a comprehensible fulfillment of celestial harmonies, much like a well-composed song or a flower in bloom. Whether the earliest astrologers in the ancient Near East conceived of planetary cycles in a circular fashion, the way they would come to be seen by astrologers in the Hellenistic era, is still unclear. Otto Neugebauer holds the idea that the Babylonian astrologers operated without a structured model of the cosmos,[1] but the knowledge they displayed regarding the planet Venus suggests that at the very least his findings are worthy of reconsideration.[2] However, regardless of when the paradigmatic shift occurred from a moldable, shape-shifting cosmos to one of swirling spheres, it was indeed a lasting shift.

The discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo were further instrumental in confirming the cyclical movement that permeated all heavenly motion, and although their work would set the stage for a world view which ultimately proved incompatible with astrology, they fulfilled a Neoplatonic dream that had guided astronomers and philosophers for centuries before.[3] In harmony with historical visions and mythological tradition, the cosmos was recognized as operating in a series of returns: planets returning to the origins of their journeys around the Sun, and the human soul returning from the journey of incarnation to a realm of stillness beyond the governance of the planetary bodies.

Even in the early dawn of astrology, the planets were recognized as distinctly different from the starry realm beyond. As a result of its nearness to those eerily still bodies of light, the planet Saturn was recognized as distinctly different from the other wandering stars. The Western mythological tradition provided the majority of the characteristics that would become associated with the planet Saturn, and these traits held fast even when the god who ensouled that farthest, slowest-moving star ceased to capture the spiritual imagination. By the time astrology had made its way east, seeking refuge from the increasingly aggressive Catholic Church in the wisdom-seeking high culture of Islam, the mythological associations of the planetary gods and goddesses had been securely established, but also made unconscious.

To understand better the mythic impact of the classical world, I turn to an especially useful text that was a collaborative effort between Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, art historians associated with the Warburg

Institute in London, entitled *Saturn and Melancholy*. In addition to tracing the mythology and philosophy associated with Saturn (namely the association of Saturn with the humor melancholy) from antiquity to the twentieth century, *Saturn and Melancholy* offers extensive information on the theoretical foundations of the concept of humors, ancient cosmology, and the journey of Neoplatonic philosophy through the ages. They explain:

> But the nature of these planets was determined not only by the astronomical and physical properties which ancient natural science had attributed to the stars Saturn, Jupiter, and the rest, but also by the tradition which ancient mythology had handed down regarding the *gods*, Saturn, Jupiter, and so on. In astrology generally, but especially in astrological notions of planetary rulers who had inherited the names and qualities of the great Olympic gods, ancient piety had been preserved in an apparently profane form; and it was to remain so much alive in the future that the very gods who had been turned into stars—that is to say, apparently stripped of divinity—were an object of pious veneration and even of formal cults for hundreds of years afterwards, while those not turned into stars—Hephaestus, Poseidon, and Athena—continued to exist merely in learned compendiums and allegorical moral tracts; even their reawakening in the humanism of the Renaissance, was to a certain extent a matter of literary convention.[4]

The key contribution of this text is its focus on artistic manifestations of the planet Saturn in the art, poetry, and literature of the Renaissance, exemplified in a lengthy disposition about Albrecht Durer's portrayal of Saturn in his woodcut *Melancholia*.[5] One especially unique perspective addressed in *Saturn and Melancholy* is that Saturn is and has been highly esteemed throughout history. Despite the negative connotations associated with Saturn in the astrological tradition, Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl point to the favorability of the melancholic humor in Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy as influencing a positive attitude about Saturn—a god who had otherwise been harshly judged by astrologers.

As historians of art, Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl show the myriad ways in which the mythic archetypes of the planets came to be known. The archetypal qualities of Saturn and Jupiter evolved over the centuries, influenced by natural science as well as the mythic imagination. This combining of a physical referent, namely the astronomical planet, with an imaginal sensibility seems to have been critical for the planet's archetypal becoming. The physical referent allowed the deities to remain active in the consciousness of humans despite changing religious climates. And so it was, preserving a trove of mythic wisdom under the guise of scientific theory, that the tradition of Greek astrology was handed over to the Muslim world in the eighth century.

As a result of this secularization of stellar lore, there is little to help us understand how the rich Greek mythological tradition was reconciled with Islam in a religious sense. Unlike the obvious syncretism that characterized the relationship between Greek and Roman astrology (and to a lesser but still potent extent, with ancient Babylonian astrology), Islam had no pantheon with which to associate the myriad personalities of planetary divinities. Nonetheless, Islam had plenty of motivation for the study of astrology. Nicholas Campion explains that within Islamic culture, "folk astronomy has three primary functions: regulation of the lunar calendar, the organization of the five daily prayer times, and the determination of the sacred direction of Mecca."[6] Rather than focusing on the *form* of astrology—the characteristics of the planets or the stories of the zodiacal constellations—Islamic astrology focused on *function*, and astrology flourished as a result.

One way to understand more clearly how the Greco-Roman polytheistic pantheon was integrated with monotheistic, aniconic Islam is to look at the techniques that were widely used, as well as those that appear to have originated, during Islam's Golden Age, between the eighth and fourteenth centuries. The orbital periods (or synodic cycles) of the planets had been well established by the time of Ptolemy, who also described how phases of a human life are ruled by a particular planet.[7] The assignment of annual rulership to a specific planet was a technique in use by the time of Vettius Valens (first century CE), whose primary work, *The Anthology* is considered representative of the broader Hellenistic astrological atmosphere.[8]

The Islamic contribution appears to be in merging the two concepts, planets ruling certain phases of life and the length of a planet's synodic cycle. Evidence for this merging is found primarily in the works of Abu'masar and Masha'allah who expounded and detailed theories on planetary revolutions, conjunctions, and the cycles of history. Abu'masar's *The Revolutions of the Years of Nativities* offers lengthy and thorough instruction for the calculation and interpretation of the revolution of years, now referred to as the Solar return chart.[9] The Solar return is an astrological chart calculated for the exact moment that the Sun returns to the degree where it was found at birth—a moment known popularly today as the birthday. Abu'masar explains the rationale as follows:

> For, just as the Sun, when it has passed through the four seasons of the year, returns to its original place and begins to be renewed another time, so should the accident be renewed another time, so that through it the strength or debility of the planets may more perfectly be demonstrated at that present time and their significations might be better understood.[10]

Abu'masar presents an interesting notion with this passage: the revolutions are not only a method for accurate predictions, but also a tool for better astrological understanding. Whereas the nativity—the birth chart—offers insight about one

primary manifestation of a particular planet (determined by its house placement, zodiacal location, aspect relationships, strength, weakness, and so forth), the revolution chart offers a kaleidoscopic view of how a given planet behaves throughout a person's entire life, thus empowering the astrologer with higher sensitivity and a potential for greater predictive accuracy.

Despite Islamic astrology's reluctance to imbue the planets with a sense of divinity that might rival or threaten the power of God, the planets Jupiter and Saturn stood apart from the others as decidedly powerful and important. Reminiscent of the Greco-Roman mythological tradition wherein the gods Kronos-Saturn and Zeus-Jupiter clash for control of the heavens, and further supported by Zoroastrian cosmology which believes the universe to be constantly embroiled in a battle between light and dark, the Jupiter-Saturn cycle was believed to be representative of world political structures, their reign and undoing.[11] Appealing to Islamic sensibilities (which favor mathematical and geometric cosmological structures as opposed to, say, powers of nature) the Jupiter-Saturn cycle aligned numerically with a long historical tradition of religious and political cycles. Campion explains:

> According to the Zoroastrians, world history was driven forward by a dialectical process characterized by 12 phases of 1,000 years each. . . . At some point . . . it was noticed that the conjunctions between the two slow-moving planets, Jupiter and Saturn, which take place every 20 years, progress through the signs of the zodiac in an orderly sequence that repeats itself after 960 years.[12]

While the concept of using astral phenomena to judge or predict the rise and fall of kingdoms is an idea that dates back to the ancient world, and was in practice in both ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt, the systematization of the theory and the direct association with Jupiter and Saturn was finely tuned by medieval Arabic astrologers and remains a popular astrological practice in the modern world.

There is a further perspective regarding the Jupiter-Saturn cycle that is well worth considering here. Nicholas Campion explains this perspective in his book *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions*:

> We need to emphasize the religious significance of Persian conjunctional theory: It allowed nothing less than a full description and analysis of God's unfolding plan. It was the application of astrology to the religious concerns of humanity *par excellence*, and its consequences were to reverberate through the apocalyptic upheavals of the Christian world down to the 17th century. The practice survives in a secular form among a tiny number of modern astrologers, while the concept of an astrological mechanism for religious development survives in such

> millenarian beliefs as the coming Age of Aquarius or Maya calendar prophecies. There is a further heresy evident in such thinking, and that is a kind of religious relativism which teaches that, while God's Truth may be absolute, the truths that any prophet, including Mohammed, teaches are provisional and likely to be superseded by his successor.[13]

What are we to make of this possibility that religious power is subject to a larger cosmological order? If we rest upon the deep foundations of Platonic philosophy, order is good. And therefore, as a representative of the principle of order (and in some traditions or interpretations, the maintainer of that order) Saturn becomes very important indeed. As Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl write: "Saturn possessed the double property of being the forefather of all other planetary gods, and of having his seat in the highest heaven. These two qualities, which must originally have been connected, assured him of unopposed supremacy in the Neoplatonic system."[14] Recalling the function of astrology in the Islamic medieval period as one of timing, ordering, and orienting, it is no wonder that the Jupiter-Saturn cycles became a lasting hallmark of Islamic astrology.

Drawing on both Zoroastrian and Neoplatonic schema regarding historical cycles (to say nothing of the influence of the Vedic Yugas on either or both of these traditions), Islamic astrology carefully navigated around the complex issue of reconciling astrological influences with the ultimate power of God by disempowering the individual planetary divinities and focusing instead on a living cosmos, subject to the will of the creator, but revealing of his wisdom nonetheless. Within a cosmological vision that holds everything to be connected and potentially revelatory of God's will, astrology can focus on the theoretical in addition to the observational. Islamic astrology excelled at creating new, and refining old, theoretically based practices, such as we see in the mathematically calculated Arabic parts, the complicated interpretation of infinitely layered revolution charts, and the philosophically based *firdaria* (medieval time lords).[15]

Although scholarship is only just beginning to focus on the transmission of astrological material between the Middle East and Far East, there are many questions left by these gaps in scholarship. For example, the *firdaria* of Abu'masar hold a great deal in common—as far as technique, interpretation, and content—as the Vedic *dasha* and *bhukti* cycles. What is the nature of their connection? The contemporary astrological notion that the "Saturn return" (the phase of life around age 28–30 years when the planet Saturn "returns" to the position it was in at birth) represents a coming of age, or a psychological unfolding, echoes the sentiment of the Vedic concept of *Sade Sati*, the roughly seven-year period of time when Saturn is transiting the zodiac sign in which an individual's Moon is located. Both of these Saturn transits are seen as potentially painful moments of loss and reckoning.[16] How did these theories inform one another?

Modern astrology is most often practiced without an awareness of the past. The modern perspective looks continuously forward, and in doing so misses parts

of its own story and heritage that are critical for contextualizing our current moment in time, both as individuals and as a global culture. Contemporary Eastern and Western interpretations of the Saturn cycle seem not to have direct historical precedents, but are instead modern inventions.

But herein lies the heart of the matter: a modern concept is anything but isolated or impermeable. If anything, the archetype of Saturn and the history of astrology show that the boundaries we seek are dotted lines at best—points on a map or flickerings of light in a night sky that reveal more about us, in the ways we reconstruct them, than about the essence of their true nature. For centuries, the Western mind (at times assuming, unfairly and with dreadful nearsightedness, that academic discourse is sufficiently representative of what one could call the Western mind) has revealed, through its unwillingness to cross the boundaries of its origin story into a world connected through cosmic sympathy and human curiosity, that it is simply still immature. There is, however, hope in this return of focus to the Saturn cycle which we see in modern astrological practice. In creating anew the cyclical nature of the unfolding cosmos, and the unfolding self, modern astrologers—with their Saturn returns and *Sade Sati*—are reminding us of our boundaries and our origins. And perhaps, we might come to see that it is not our boundaries that define us, but it is in the borderlands, in the meeting of minds and cultures, where true identity can be found.

Notes

[1] Otto Neugebauer, *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity* (New York: Dover Press, 1969), 100.

[2] Nicholas Campion presents the argument that on account of the Babylonian's awareness that Venus as morning and evening star was one and the same body, they must have assumed some underlying pattern to account for the star's regularity. See Nicholas Campion, *A History of Western Astrology* (London: Continuum, 2011), 58.

[3] Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 48–55.

[4] Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (Nendeln, Switzerland: Kraus Reprint, 1979), 133.

[5] Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 284.

[6] Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 179.

[7] Claudius Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* (Mokelumne Hill, CA: Health Research Press, 1969), 202.

[8] Vettius Valens, *The Anthology*, trans. Robert Schmidt and Robert Hand (Berkeley Springs, WV: Golden Hind Press, 1993).

[9] Abu'masar, *The Revolutions of the Years of Nativities,* trans. Benjamin Dykes (Minneapolis, MN: The Cazimi Press, 2010).

[10] Abu'masar, quoted in James Herschel Holden, *A History of Horoscopic Astrology* (Tempe, AZ: American Federation of Astrologers Press, 1996), 117.

[11] See David Pingree and E. S. Kennedy, *The Astrological History of Masha'allah* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) for a detailed analysis of Zoroastrian influences on both the theory and practice of the Jupiter-Saturn cycles.

[12] Campion, *Astrology and Cosmology*, 182.

[13] Campion, *Astrology and Cosmology*, 183.

[14] Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 129.

[15] See Abu'masar, *The Revolutions of the Years of Nativities.*

[16] For a modern interpretation of the Saturn cycle from the Western perspective see Liz Greene, *Saturn: A New Look at an Old Devil* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2011); for an explanation of the Vedic *Sade Sati* concept see Hart Defouw and Robert Svoboda, *Light on Life: An Introduction to the Astrology of India* (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press, 2011).

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