

INTRODUCTION

Persian Nativities is part of a cycle of translations which will define the contours of medieval astrology for modern students, using the most important Latin texts, astrologers, and parts of the medieval period: primarily the Latin translations of the Persian and Arab astrologers of the 8th-10th Centuries.¹ In *Persian Nativities II* I present translations of ‘Umar al-Tabari’s *Three Books on Nativities* (TBN) and Abū Bakr’s *On Nativities*, both important natal works which had lasting influence in the Latin West up through the time of William Lilly. *Persian Nativities III* (forthcoming, 2010) will present a new translation of Abū Ma’shar’s *On the Revolutions of the Nativity* as a stand-alone volume, containing annual techniques such as profections, solar revolutions, primary directions through the bounds, the *firdāriyyāt* (sing. *firdāriyyah*), and more. Barring new discoveries,² after *Persian Nativities III* I will consider the natal portion of the cycle complete and definitive.

In the next few years I will release other installments in this cycle, featuring first-time translations of horary, electional, and mundane material, with additional volumes acting as invitations and introductions to the whole project. Within five years, students interested in traditional and particularly medieval astrology will enjoy a complete learning experience in all branches of astrology, from basic concepts to delineation, numerous predictive techniques, and a traditional philosophical outlook. Of course students may also supplement their reading with Hellenistic works such as the *Carmen* of Dorotheus, Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos*, or Rhetorius, and also by later Renaissance and early modern works. On my own site at www.bendykes.com, I have begun to issue free study guides for students, and more will appear throughout the cycle.

§1: *New insights: prosperity, the mubtazz*

One benefit of comparing all four texts in *Persian Nativities I-II* is that one may get a richer view of how topics were handled and conceived. For one thing, both *BA* and Abū Bakr provide lists of individual questions to ask

¹ Original Pahlavi works are largely lost, and there are few astrologers in the Western tradition who can read Arabic.

² Pingree has claimed that an edition of the *Book on Nativities* by a so-called Zaradusht will be published, but I do not currently know its status. Zaradusht also wrote several works on mundane astrology.

about topics such as marriage or siblings.³ For another, the treatments of topics such as wealth and prosperity shed light on how the Persians reconceived the Hellenistic material. If we take Abū Bakr as our example, the Persians first seem to have distinguished several categories of prosperity, from those who will always enjoy high status, to middling or low status, and even those who will go from high to low or from low to high prosperity.⁴ This overlapped with but was not identical to, financial wealth. In a related way, they also distinguished those who have well-defined leading roles in the society as a whole (which normally confers lasting wealth and prosperity) from those who work at a trade (which can fluctuate in wealth). Thus in the leading roles we have kings, politicians and governmental functionaries, military leaders, and what we might now call captains of industry: these are handled alongside the prosperity material, or at least separately from the trades. In the category of trades or “masteries” (professions) people are distinguished by practical skills such as being a carpenter, but with *no* indications as to the inherent level of wealth. Thus the Persian delineation of prosperity, wealth, and profession is handled in terms of a realistic understanding of social structure and functions. But these distinctions are not made at all clear in Bonatti, appear in a disorganized, piecemeal way in Dorotheus, and were obscured in Holden’s translation of *JN*. Only by taking these works together can we see a coherent approach and set of delineation instructions.

These texts also provide the closest answer yet to the issue of the “weighted” *mubtaẓẓ* and who invented it. *Mubtaẓẓ* (often spelled *almuten*) means “winner,” and is nothing more than a planet which—among a set of competing options—is authoritative enough to act as the chief planet to represent some topic. This idea is common enough in Hellenistic longevity techniques, when identifying the “predominator” (Gr. *epikratētor*) or in medieval astrology the *hīlāj* (or *hyleg*). And Ptolemy himself⁵ provides a method for finding a *mubtaẓẓ* or ruling planet, in which the rulers of different dignities in some place each receive one point or count: the one with the most points is the most authoritative planet to work with.

But at some point in the Perso-Arabic period, a weighted approach to the *mubtaẓẓ* was adopted. Instead of the Lords of dignities receiving one point

³ See throughout *BA* III, and Abū Bakr I.1.2.

⁴ See for instance *BA* III.2.0, *JN* Ch. 7, *TBN* III.1, and Abū Bakr II.2.0.

⁵ *Tet.* III.5.

apiece, the domicile Lord of a place received 5, the exalted Lord (if there was one) received 4, the primary triplicity Lord 3, the bound Lord 2, and the face or decan Lord 1. Again, the one with the most points was the *mubtaẓẓ*. But this method was not universally adopted. It is not found in Sahl or Māshā'allāh or Abū 'Alī's *JN*. 'Umar himself seems to follow Ptolemy, but in one place (*TBN* III.4.2) he refers to the luminary of the sect as being a *mubtaẓẓ* showing that it did not always have a consistent technical meaning. But by about 850 AD, the weighted *mubtaẓẓ* was straightforwardly endorsed by al-Kindī⁶ and later by al-Qabīsi,⁷ whose book was so popular in the Latin West that Bonatti simply repeats al-Qabīsi's account.⁸ What happened between the 790s and approximately 850 AD?

We may now know. In his material on parents, Abū Bakr makes a few statements explaining his connections to 'Umar and his texts. First (II.5.9), he describes a day on which a then-famous poet and astrologer, Abū al-'Anbas al-Saimari,⁹ helped him delineate a client's chart (thus establishing al-'Anbas as a more experienced mentor). Next (II.5.10), he describes how his own father used to watch 'Umar work. Finally (II.5.14), he mentions in passing that al-'Anbas¹⁰ told him how "he had found the *mubtaẓẓ* according to what 'Umar said, by giving 5 dignities to the Lord of the domicile, 4 to the Lord of the exaltation," and so on. But Abū Bakr does not explicitly endorse or reject this approach, which indicates that it was not a commonly-accepted view.

Let me say a few words about this al-'Anbas, because more research needs to be done on him.¹¹ He was a poet, raunchy satirist, polemicist, and astronomer-astrologer. Sources agree he was originally from Kufa and died in 888 AD, but his birth year is unclear. Sezgin claims that the usual date of 828 AD is suspect, and I agree. For Abū Bakr says (II.5.9) that either he or al-

⁶ *The Forty Chapters* §137.

⁷ Al-Qabīsi I.77.

⁸ *BOA* pp. 145-46.

⁹ Al-'Anbas seems to mean "the talker," which does match his reputation (see below).

¹⁰ The 1540 edition and Jag. seem to differ on this. 1540 unequivocally names al-'Anbas, but Jag. attributes a different statement to him, then attributes the weighted *mubtaẓẓ* to something like Azemcrael, who is probably al-Hasan bin Sahl, an astrologer and vizier to Caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-833), whose dates are 782-851. But this al-Hasan bin Sahl is probably not the inventor of the weighted *mubtaẓẓ*, as he was part of the Pahlavi-to-Arabic translation movement and so would probably would have followed the source material which did not contain such a weighted *mubtaẓẓ*. He should also have been able to ask 'Umar personally about his *mubtaẓẓ* instead of having to invent a weighting system.

¹¹ See Sezgin pp. 152-53, and Bosley pp. 30-31.

‘Anbas was twenty-three when they were together in 844 AD: if al-‘Anbas were born in 828, this would have made him sixteen when he mentored Abū Bakr (which is unlikely); but if Abū Bakr was twenty-three, then al-‘Anbas’s birth is would have been somewhat earlier, putting Abū Bakr’s own birth at about 821 AD. This latter option makes more sense to me.

Al-‘Anbas befriended famous poets of the day, was for a while a magistrate, and lived at the courts of Caliphs al-Mutawakkil (r. in Samarra 847-861) and al-Mu’tamid (r. in Baghdad 870-892). He was interested in a life of vagrancy and the social underworld, wrote bawdy works whose titles should probably not be repeated here, a *Refutation of the Astrologers* (in which he probably posed as a critic), and much more. Astrologically speaking, he wrote several works which survive in Arabic, including a *Book of Nativities* and an introductory work on astrology which—according to critics—he plagiarized from his contemporary Abū Ma’shar. In fact it seems that accusations of plagiarism followed him in several areas, and I get the impression that there was something of the moocher and con man to him. However, his works deserve to be examined, because I suspect that he would be rather vocal about having invented the weighted *mubtazz*.

Thus, Abū Bakr had a connection to one of the more famous early astrologers of the period through a family member, which increases his credibility regarding ‘Umar’s practice. He identifies a bombastic astrologer and poet as inventing the weighted *mubtazz*. It further suggests that as people learned this Persian astrology now in Arabic, they struggled with some of the techniques: the weighted *mubtazz* must have been part of this attempt at understanding, but it was a particular response to a particular passage and not conclusive or generalizable in any way. From this we should conclude that the real and dubious influence of al-‘Anbas was to have invented this weighted *mubtazz* sometime between the death of ‘Umar in 815 and his mentorship of Abū Bakr in 844 AD, bequeathing it thereafter to notable contemporaries such as al-Kindī. The rest, as they say, is history. But these facts also support the argument that the weighted *mubtazz* is misguided and artificial. Those who use it, from the *mubtazz* of the chart as found in Abraham ibn Ezra,¹² to the elaborate numeric grids in Lilly’s *Christian Astrology*, must wonder if and when it is justified.

¹² See ibn Ezra, pp. 13-14.

§2: *Between the Persians and the Latins: medieval changes and trajectories*

Based on the above facts and some of the trends I noted in my introduction to *Persian Nativities I*, I would like to summarize a few important changes which took place in medieval astrology, which affects our understanding of it today.

First, the readability of John of Spain's translations influenced what works were favored in the Latin West, and what vocabulary astrologers still use. Difficult, fussy translations by people like Hugo of Santalla (such as the *Book of Aristotle*, with its Hellenistic techniques) were more readily ignored, while easier works written by John or in his style (such as Abū Bakr, *JN*, *TBN*) were more popular and used as the basis for works like Bonatti's *Book of Astronomy*. Thus also, we say "exaltation" because of John's use of *exaltatio*; we do not follow Hugo and speak of a planet's "kingdom" or "supremacy" (*regnum*).

Second, the timing and length of certain translations also affected what texts and techniques were used. For example, Abū Ma'shar's *On Rev. Nat.* seems to have been translated into Latin too late (1268) for Bonatti to have used it. Thus, early and shortish introductory works like al-Qabīṣī's, which uses a weighted *mubtaẓẓ* but has only minimal information on the annual predictive techniques, enjoyed great popularity—thus passing on the weighted *mubtaẓẓ* but not the extensive annual methods. This too, affected how astrologers worked.

Third, one clear feature of the astrology of the very popular 'Umar and Abū 'Ali is the use of methods akin to horary in delineating natal matters. Abū 'Ali clearly draws on the older 'Umar, looking at the relationship between the most powerful planet ruling the matters of the native, and the one ruling the matters of some topic (such as parents). This would have been familiar to people practicing horary, for which 'Umar was well known. But the delineation material in *JN* and *TBN* which supplies the remaining details (based on Hellenistic-era texts) is disorganized and thin compared with the parallel and fuller accounts in the *Book of Aristotle*. Thus the horary contribution to astrology began to blend into much natal practice.

Based on these trends and this new discovery in Abū Bakr, I would like to propose that there was a divergence of "lineage" in natal astrology. The first stream or lineage is the more traditional one based on Hellenistic techniques. It runs from sources in Valens, Dorotheus and Rhetorius, through

Māshā'allāh and Sahl.¹³ It does not use a weighted *mubtazz*, continued to rely more on whole-sign houses, and borrowed little from horary technique. But it did not predominate in the Latin West and so was largely lost after the 13th Century. The second stream or lineage draws less on the delineation details of Dorotheus and others, and runs through 'Umar, al-'Anbas, al-Kindī, and others. This stream began to adopt the weighted *mubtazz*, tended towards quadrant-based houses, and applied horary technique to nativities. It was more popular and so became favored. Not every astrologer fits neatly into one of these two categories, and some (such as Abū 'Alī) straddle both. But I think this basic distinction is helpful in trying to understand the nature of medieval natal practice in the West.

§4: 'Umar al-Tabarī's Three Books of Nativities

'Umar bin al-Farrukhān al-Tabarī¹⁴ was one of the earliest and most famous Persian astrologers writing in Arabic. Like Māshā'allāh, he was one of the members of the largely Persian team to have established the election chart for the founding of Baghdad (July 31, 762). Apart from *TBN*, he wrote a work on the Persian theory of conjunctions and mundane revolutions, a work of 138 chapters on horary (which must be the basis for his prominence in the Latin *Book of the Nine Judges*), another work of 136 chapters which seems to be on horary and perhaps elections, and another on "reading thoughts," a work which must have been on consultation charts, and which recalls Māshā'allāh's *On the Interpretation of Cognition*.¹⁵ Sezgin lists other possible works which still need to be verified. Perhaps his most important contribution was a translation of Dorotheus's *Carmen* from its Pahlavi edition into Arabic, the most complete surviving version of that book in any language. Māshā'allāh had also made his own translation, but it exists only in small bits. The fact that these two colleagues made their own translations, and that *TBN* mentions Māshā'allāh only to criticize him, suggests that they may not have been on good terms. 'Umar died in about 815 AD.

This is the second translation of *TBN*, replacing the Project Hindsight edition of 1997. At the time, there were few known texts explaining the Persian annual methods: 'Umar himself omits some elements such as the

¹³ It may also be picked up by Abū Ma'shar in his work on nativities, which is still only in Arabic.

¹⁴ See Sezgin, pp. 111-13.

¹⁵ See my *Works of Sahl & Māshā'allāh* (2008).

firdāriyyāt, only a few people even knew of the existence of the *Book of Aristotle* or its model in the work of al-Andarzaghār, and no one has yet translated Abū Bakr's own work on the revolutions of nativities. Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, Bonatti's and al-Qabīṣī's treatments are rather brief and not well informative. On top of this, *TBN* Books I-II were badly organized: as a result, they appeared to be a nightmare jumble of theories and techniques.¹⁶

All of these problems have now disappeared, and readers of this edition of *TBN* will find it very reader-friendly and easy to understand. It is now evident that the formerly jumbled appearance (with insertions from other authors) actually disguised a kind of organization followed by Abū Bakr, borrowed in turn from 'Umar. Using *BA* and Abū Bakr as partial models, I have for the most part simply rearranged individual paragraphs to form a virtually seamless and logical progression of ideas and techniques. Otherwise, I have deleted the insertions from other works (now in Appendix A), and added some bracketed section titles and added bracketed numbers to itemize certain lists of signifiers and topics in order to make *TBN*'s relation to contemporary Persian treatments explicit. Following are some highlights of this edition:

Book I: Organization. This book is now wholly devoted to general questions about life: conception, gestation, rearing or nourishment, and longevity. Several paragraphs on these topics have been brought up from the end of the Latin Book III, while others were put into Appendix A: it seems that some editor inserted four horary questions about pregnancy and birth based on works of 'Umar, since two of them bear a resemblance to questions in the *Book of the Nine Judges*.

Book I: Four types of nativities. 'Umar's four-part division of births is based on Dorotheus's material on rearing, which Māshā'allāh handled in only a very general way in *BA* III.1.2-3. Abū Bakr clearly bases his own division on 'Umar, and like 'Umar has a similar (but greatly expanded) treatment of pregnancy.

Book II: Organization. This book is devoted entirely to annual methods, and needed the most reorganization. 'Umar's methods include directions, the *jārbakhtār* method of directing through the bounds, directions in the solar revolution, and proflections.

¹⁶ Also, being misled by later texts, Hand and Schmidt believed that 'Umar used a compound weighted *mubtāḥ* (pp. vi, viii).

Book II: Three predictive “conditions.” As part of his annual methods, ‘Umar introduces three terms for predicting the life and condition of the native and his parents (II.4-6). The “general” condition of the native and parents uses primary directions in the nativity; the “greater” condition uses profections in the nativity; the “lesser” condition uses primary directions in the solar revolution, directing various points around the entire circle over the course of one year. For parents, the points to be directed differ based on what condition is sought.

Book II: 30° increment profections. ‘Umar’s profection method departs from the usual approach. In Hellenistic astrology and as found in *BA*, profections are done sign-by-sign. But ‘Umar profects in 30° increments from whatever point he is interested in, and treats that increment as a compacted year: thus every 2.5° of a 30° increment is equivalent to one month, and shows by the positions of planets or their rays when some effect should come about.

Book II: 7th Century charts. ‘Umar’s charts illustrating the three conditions of the native suggest an intriguing possibility: that his annual techniques are based on a Sassanian original, perhaps by al-Andarzaghār himself. For the charts can all be dated to between 614 and 642 AD, shortly before the Muslim invasions: since al-Andarzaghār seems to be Māshā’allāh’s and Abū Ma’shar’s main sources, could these charts provide evidence of his rough dates?¹⁷

Book III: Horary-style delineations. As mentioned above, ‘Umar did rely primarily on works like *Carmen* and *Tet.* for his material on rearing and longevity, and presumably material based on al-Andarzaghār for his annual methods. But his distinctive approach to delineation is largely a combination of a Ptolemy-style *mubtazz* to determine primary signifiers, and a horary-style comparison between them. In fact it is striking how little material Hellenistic material available to him (especially as a translator of *Carmen*) he actually used in topical delineations such as siblings and wealth—which is one reason why his chapters are so short when compared with the other works in *Persian Nativities*. This does not make his focus on horary-style combinations illegitimate, but it is something to note when comparing him to his contemporaries.

¹⁷ We must also consider Abū Ma’shar’s chart in *On Rev. Nat.*, which can be dated to August 19, 550 AD JC. This chart would have been cast around the time of the revisions to many Pahlavi texts and the influx of philosophers and astrologers from the Byzantine Empire.

Relation to JN. In *Persian Nativities I*, I pointed out that Abū ‘Ali’s *JN* was a *pastiche* of different works, with the middle portions based on *BA* and *TBN*, and the beginning and final chapters comprised of works by Māshā’allāh. I still maintain this view, but would like to add a few more details. While there is a close connection between *JN* and *TBN* (such as the initial lists of significators and their horary-style combinations), the text still shows that Abū ‘Ali either had access to fuller editions of works like *Carmen* or else relied on Māshā’allāh—and yet kept to a very pared-down treatment of topics. For example, in the material on travel, almost all of ‘Umar’s treatment (III.8) is reflected virtually verbatim in *JN* Ch. 27. Abū ‘Ali then goes on to include material such as the days of the Moon after birth, which comes right out of the fuller edition of *Carmen* which Māshā’allāh had (see *BA* III.9.2). But Abū ‘Ali omits the rest of the *Carmen* material we can see reflected in *BA* III.9.2. For the topic of friends, *JN*’s description of the quadruplicities of the significators (pp. 301-02) provides a more complete account than *TBN*’s, which only includes the movable signs. But rather than use *BA*’s additional descriptions of synastry with the Lot of Friends (*BA* III.12), he sticks to ‘Umar’s horary-style structure.

Thus, while *JN* is reader-friendly and good for beginners, it is a *pastiche* whose motivations for particular contents is puzzling. It uses some of *BA* or *Carmen* to supplement *TBN* (travel) but neglects other, obvious material. It fills in some gaps in *TBN* (friends), suggesting that perhaps there was a fuller version of *TBN* available, but then does not use all of ‘Umar’s material. And when other approaches to topics are available, Abū ‘Ali prefers ‘Umar’s simplified horary structure. *JN* probably represents an attempt both to compose a handy textbook for Abū ‘Ali’s personal use, and a general attempt to confront and synthesize the different lineages or streams which were forming during the Arabic period, as I mentioned above.

§5: *Abū Bakr’s On Nativities*

Abū Bakr al-Hasan bin al-Khasībī al-Kūfī was an astrologer and possibly a physician living in the 9th Century, and very influential on astrologers such as William Lilly. His exact dates are unknown, but as I explained above he was most likely born in 821 AD. “Al-Khasīb” refers to calculation and arithmetic, indicating that his father was a mathematician and—according to his report in II.5.10—an observer of ‘Umar’s own astrological practice. As also mentioned, a mentor of his was the bombastic astrologer and poet, al-‘Anbas