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INTRODUCTION

I am happy to present *Choices & Inceptions*, the electional volume of my *Essential Medieval Astrology* series.¹ It is the only volume, because for the most part electional texts are repetitive and exhibit little variety in approach. Moreover, there is much overlap in the four most widely known electional texts, three of which are translated here in Part III (see below).² Taking some statements by Deborah Houlding as a guide, I have divided the book into three parts:

Part I includes two texts which describe elections based solely on the Moon's position: her position in the Lunar mansions, and her applications to the other planets. This is the crudest and most general type of consideration, because it describes conditions which apply to everyone, everywhere, at the same time, for periods up to a day or so. This Part includes al-Kindī's short *The Choices of Days* and Ch. VII.101 of al-Rijāl's *The Book of the Skilled in the Judgments of the Stars*.

Part II includes two texts which focus on electing by planetary hours. This is slightly more sophisticated than the previous type, because the lengths of planetary hours are sensitive to season and latitude, and their periods are shorter than those of the Lunar applications (thereby requiring more sensitive planning). Nevertheless they barely employ the full battery of astrological concepts and lore in determining auspicious times. This Part includes *On the Hours of the Planets* by Bethen,³ and Ch. VII.100 of al-Rijāl.

Part III includes what I am calling "complete" elections: a complete consideration of all features of an electional chart, such as house rulerships and positions, planetary hours, planetary configurations, sect, malefic and benefic distinctions, and even distinctions between more

¹ For a list of works in the series (and projected, forthcoming works), see Appendix E.

² The fourth is Book V of Dorotheus, which I will discuss later on.

³ My own view is that "Bethen" is a medieval Latin writer of the 11th or 12th Centuries, since the section of his work which derives from Sahl's *On Elect.* is taken verbatim from the John of Seville translation (at least, it was probably translated by John, and I will refer to it as such). The name "Bethen" may in fact be a rendering of the name of the second Lunar mansion and its primary fixed star, Botein.

general elective approaches and very specific ones based on a client's nativity or question. This Part includes a revised translation of Sahl bin Bishr's *On Elections*, al-'Imrānī's famous *The Book of Choices*, and Tr. VII of al-Rijāl (which is completely devoted to elections and timing procedures).

Before introducing some of the contents of these works, I would like to address some issues of terminology, the relation of elections to questions (horary), event charts, thought-interpretation, and so on.

§1: What is an election?

In one sense elections are simple to understand, and they form a clearly-defined branch in traditional astrology (along with nativities, questions or "horary,"⁴ and mundane astrology). The word "election" simply means "choice," from the Latin *eligo* ("to pick out, choose"). Electional astrology chooses advantageous times to perform deliberate actions: from when to go to war, to the forming of a business partnership, to the right times for travel. For the most part, this is all we have to know before jumping into the practice of elections.

On the other hand, there are complications with respect to the relation between elections and questions, and their relation to thought-interpretation and "event charts." Moreover, there were medieval debates about the appropriateness of elections, and whether and how to cast an election chart for someone with an unknown nativity. This latter point brings in the medieval theory of "roots," and has a connection to some uses of ancient logic. So, elections occupy a complicated position within the branches of astrology. Let us first turn to some points of terminology.

Terminology

Above, I mentioned the Latin verb *eligo*, whence we get the Latin *electio* and our English *election*. In Arabic, elections or choices are normally called

⁴ For the most part I will use "questions" and "interrogations" instead of "horary," which simply means "pertaining to the hour" (i.e., pressing questions of the moment).

ikhtiyārāt, “choices,” from the verb *khāra* (“to choose, pick out”): so, these words mean exactly the same thing in Arabic and Latin.

But this notion of choosing is ambiguous, because it mainly refers to the intellectual *commitment* to an action, not the actual undertaking of it. In fact, one might even suppose that this notion of choice really refers to what the *astrologer* does in choosing an auspicious time, rather than what the client or agent of the action does: so that “election” may have begun as an insider term of art among professional astrologers. For the action itself, Arabic writers (such as al-Kindī,⁵ Sahl,⁶ and al-Qabīṣī⁷) used *ibtidā’āt* (“beginnings, undertakings”), from *badā’* (“begin, start, make the first step”). This was translated accurately into Latin as *inceptiones* (“beginnings, undertakings,” whence we get the English “inception”), from the verb *incipio*—and the person who actually performs the action and undertaking, is an *inceptor* (“one who undertakes, begins”).⁸ So again, the Arabic and Latin match perfectly.

Now, it happens that the earlier Greek writers on elections (such as Hephaistio of Thebes and Dorotheus of Sidon) did not refer to this branch as “choices.” Rather, they used the Greek equivalent of the second group of words in the previous paragraph: *katarchē* (“beginning”), from *katarchō* (“to make a beginning”).⁹ And so, while later Arabic and Latin authors seemed to speak on the one hand of how an astrologer “chooses” an auspicious time, they followed the Greek-language writers by referring to the actions themselves as “beginnings” and “undertakings.” This branch of astrology is about the choosing of times, but for successful actions, beginnings, undertakings.

Questions, elections, and thought-interpretation: overlap and ambiguity

Now, it would seem that elections are clearly distinguishable from questions or interrogations. According to our normal understanding, interrogational astrology has to do with getting answers to specific questions, whereas elections have to do with choosing a time for a topic that is already

⁵ Burnett 1993, pp. 82-83.

⁶ See references in Crofts, p. 237.

⁷ Al-Qabīṣī, pp. 136-37.

⁸ Remember that the paying client might not be the same person as the one undertaking the action.

⁹ See for example Hephaistio vol. 1, p. 403. But as I will show below, there are good reasons to suppose that *katarchai* should be understood as “relative” or “secondary” beginnings.

known (and which we want to be successful). But things are not that simple. It is true that some matters can be considered more or less “pure” questions, such as “where is my lost cow?” Others may be considered more or less “pure” elections, such as “when should I set out on my journey?” Again, questions may be asked about matters in which one is not personally involved or cannot make much of a contribution to, such as “will X win the war?”—while elections suppose that one is personally involved and has the power to make a decision. However, there are a number of reasons why questions and elections are not so clearly distinct.¹⁰ Let’s start with some observations about questions and elections.

(1) Some questions imply an action. In some interrogational texts, the answers to questions of the form “will it happen?” take the form of “yes, but only if you do X.” An instructional example from Sahl¹¹ expresses this in the form of a rule, to the effect that if the querent seeks an honor, the lord of the Ascendant in the tenth shows that he will get it, but only through his own effort; but if the lord of the tenth is in the Ascendant, he will get it without effort. Bonatti provides a chart from his own practice,¹² responding to a question as to whether a general would successfully besiege and occupy an enemy castle. Bonatti’s answer is basically of the form, “yes you can, but you won’t”: he points out that the general “ought to have it,” but only “provided that first the things that needed to be done to capture it, came to pass”; however, he points out that certain features of the chart indicated “they would not apply themselves to those things by which the castle ought to and could be taken. And this was the reason it was not taken, when it could have been taken.” In these cases, an abstract answer of “yes” or “no” may be given, but it is connected with the necessity of some future action. If the answer is “yes,” one might well elect a time to perform that action, but sometimes (as in Bonatti’s example), the question shows that while the action is possible, it will not take place.

(2) Some elections require a successful question. As we will see below, medieval writers recognized that some actions need to be confirmed by a reliable nativity (with annual predictions, *etc.*), or even a successful question. For instance, suppose the nativity is neutral or ambiguous as to the success of business travel: one might well need to ask a question as to the success of

¹⁰ I am also aware that there is a debate on the use of *katarchē* to describe elections, questions, and event charts under one umbrella, but will not address it here.

¹¹ *On Quest.* §10.1 (*Judges* §10.1).

¹² *BOA* Tr. 6, Part II, 7th House, Ch. 29.

***THE BOOK OF THE SKILLED VII.101:
ON ELECTIONS ACCORDING TO
THE MOON'S MOTION
THROUGH THE MANSIONS
AL-RIJĀL***

[1] *Al-Naḥh*,¹ from the beginning of Aries up to the twelfth degree, 51 minutes and 26 seconds, is the first mansion.

The Indians say that if the Moon were in this mansion, it is good to drink medicines, to put beasts to pasture, to make a journey on that day, unless [it is] in the second hour² of the day.

Dorotheus said: it is not good to make a marriage-union when the Moon is in this mansion (nor even in all of Aries), nor to buy slaves in it, because they will be bad and disobedient or they will flee. However, it is good to buy domesticated and ridden animals, and to make a journey, especially by ship: because it signifies that he will go well and in a good way. It is not good to form an association in it, because he says that it will not last, but one [of them] will withdraw, unsubdued,³ from the other. He even says that one who is caught in it,⁴ will have a strong and bad imprisonment. And if it were asked of you about a theft, with the Moon appearing in Aries, say that the stolen thing is usually put on the head or face, or worked by hand. It is good to make arms in it, to plant trees, to cut the hair on the head, to cut the nails,⁵ and to put on new clothes: and all of this with the Moon appearing free of the infortunes.

[2] *Al-Butayn*,⁶ from 12 degrees, 51 minutes, 26 seconds of Aries up to the twenty-fifth degree, 42 minutes, 52 seconds of it.

¹ "The butting" (Lat. *Alnaḥh*).

² This should probably read, "second part" or "second one-third" of the day, as the division of the day into thirds is repeated below.

³ *Impacatus*.

⁴ It is unclear to me whether this has to do with an election to capture someone, or the time of an "event chart" in which someone is captured.

⁵ *Ungulas*, which should be *ungues*.

⁶ "The little belly" (Lat. *Albetḥāin*).

The Indians say that if the Moon were in this mansion, it is good to sow, make journeys.

And Dorotheus says that it is not good to form a marriage-union in it, [nor] to buy slaves; and concerning slaves, a ship, and captives, he says what he says for *al-Naḥh*.

[3] *Al-Thurayyā*,⁷ from 25 degrees, 42 minutes, 52 seconds of Aries up to the eighth degree, 34 minutes, 18 seconds of Taurus.

The Indians say that if the Moon were in this mansion, it is good to trade and to avenge oneself on one's enemies; it is even [good] in a middling way for travel.

Dorotheus says: it is not good to form a marriage-union in it; it is good to buy domesticated beasts in it, and one who will be on a journey by water will undergo dread and dangers. It is not good to form an association in it, especially with a more powerful person, because he would not be able to be separated from him unless with labor and regret. And he says that one who will be captured or were caught in it, will have a strong and long incarceration on the occasion of assets: the assets will be taken away from him, and he will go out of prison. It is good for every thing which comes to be through fire, and for the hunting of animals, and for doing good. But it is bad for buying cows and a flock,⁸ and for planting trees and sowing, and for putting on new clothes.

[4] *Al-Dabarān*⁹ is extended from 8 degrees, 34 minutes, 18 seconds of Taurus, up to the twenty-first degree, 25 minutes, [44 seconds] of it.

The Indians say that if the Moon were in this mansion, it is good to sow, to dress [in] new clothes, and to take on¹⁰ women and their ornaments, to demolish¹¹ every building and to begin another, [and] to make a journey, unless it is in the third part of that day.

Dorotheus says: it is not good to form a marriage-union in it, because the woman will desire to have sexual intercourse with another. And he says that

⁷ "The Pleiades" (Lat. *Althoraiē*).

⁸ This contradicts the statement just given about buying domesticated animals.

⁹ "The two buttocks" (Burnett) or the star Aldebaran (Lat. *Addavenam*); but "the Follower" (Robson).

¹⁰ *Acipere*. This can mean to welcome, take responsibility for, *etc.* But see mansion 22, which implies taking a woman in marriage.

¹¹ Reading with 1551, for what seems to be *villae*.

THE BOOK OF CHOICES

AL-'IMRĀNĪ

[Prologue]

IN THE NAME OF THE LORD. ‘Ali bin Ahmad al-’Imrānī said: You have asked me, my dearest, that I should compose a book for you on choosing hours according to the methods of the astrologers in every beginning of works. And therefore I have compiled this book, one better than all of those in which the ancients agreed.¹ And I have put two treatises in it:

The first treatise is on the advantages of the elections of hours, and how one must choose for those whose nativities are known, or how [you must choose] for those who make interrogations about those things which they want to undertake, and what are the hours in which whatever was undertaken, is ended.²

The second treatise [is] on particular elections, such as entrances into estates³ and departures from them, or beginning a journey, and what is like these. And I have organized it in a clear order, to the extent that we may discover whatever we want to find.

Now, this book (namely, of elections) is not like a book on nativities: in [nativities], we are able to put off [certain topics] until we review [our] books.⁴ But in this science, it sometimes happens that the haste to choose [a time] is so great that it is not permitted to look in one’s books. And I believe that this method of treating [the subject] will please you not a little, after it has been made evident to you.

¹ *Convenerint*. Throughout the book, al-’Imrānī highlights disagreements (or at least, multiple opinions) among the older authorities.

² That is, prediction: see I.5 below.

³ *Villas*.

⁴ *In quibus differe possumus donec libros revolvamus*. This sentence must be read with the next one. Al-’Imrānī seems to mean that with nativities, many topics will not be relevant until much later, or we have lots of opinions to review, and we can wait until later to advise a client on some area of life; but in elections, a client tends to have a pressing need, and we must be able to give clear guidance quickly.

TREATISE I

The first treatise has five sections,⁵ the first of which is whether elections are useful; the second, on the elections of all undertakings; the third, on the elections of men whose nativities are known; the fourth, on the knowledge of whether what is asked about will be ended well or badly, and on his election after an interrogation that is made; the fifth, which hours we trust so that what was begun, would be perfected.

Chapter I.1.0: Whether elections are useful

Through evident reasoning, it has been proven by Ptolemy the king⁶ that the works of the judgments of the stars are certain. And I have added certain proofs in my own book, while I have laid out the words of Ptolemy. Therefore, it is necessary that a portion of this wisdom (namely, that of elections) be useful, if we concede that the work is true. For from this work it is agreed that if we knew the hour of the impregnation of some woman or of an animal, we will know through it what would become of this seed until it receives breath,⁷ and what [would happen] until it would go out of the uterus, and what could become of it up until the day of death, just as he says in [his] work on astrology: but astrologers did not judge through nativities [in this way], since they could hardly be certain of the hour of impregnation. However, Ptolemy says the hour of the nativity signifies a second⁸ beginning.

⁵ *Differentiarum*. In my own treatment, I will label these as “chapters.”

⁶ In this paragraph, al-ʿImrānī is referring to the discussion of conception charts and birth charts in *Tet.* III.2. Ptolemy suggests that while the conception chart might be called an original beginning (*arabē*), the birth chart may be considered a kind of inception (*katarabē*) which builds upon it. Since *katarabē* is the standard Greek word used for what we call “elections” or “choices,” the thrust of al-ʿImrānī’s discussion is to say that electional astrology has as much validity as natal astrology—and he wants to use Ptolemy to prove it. Moreover, this use of Ptolemy suggests a reliance on naturalism or physical causes to explain why certain times have various qualities. I explain this argument a little bit more in my Introduction.

⁷ *Inspiretur*. Al-ʿImrānī seems to mean the traditional view that the soul or living-giving breath enters the fetus sometime during the pregnancy. See for example Abū Bakr I.2 (in PN 2).

⁸ Reading *secundum...initium* with Paris 7413-I for *omne* (Madrid) and *iudicium* (Paris 16204). Ptolemy considers the nativity to be a *katarabē*, a beginning *relative to* or *deriving from*, the true *arabē* or beginning: conception.

Since this is so, when we elect the hour of conception for someone by following the judgments of the books of nativities, good things will befall the native, which the astrologer will have pronounced according to the books of nativities; and in the same way we will speak about the planting of trees, and about sowing seeds, and also in the building of cities, and also in every inception.

[Chapter I.1.1: For whom one must elect]

All astrologers⁹ are agreed that one should elect for no one whose nativity is unknown—which to me does not seem consistent.¹⁰ Know that it is good to elect according to nativities, but in every [case of] two good works, if it is impossible that what is best should be had, one must not overlook the other good which is possible to have. For those doing this¹¹ are likened to a certain traveler who, though he was able to go by horse, since he was not able to mount on a golden sedan chair, nor [have] a tent which would protect him from the heat of the Sun's rays, after dismissing the horse the stupid man went along on his journey [on foot]. In the same [way], one must have confidence with respect to the election of those whose nativities are unknown, and those whose nativities are made clear, except that there are certain things necessary for those whose nativities are made evident with us.

[Chapter I.1.2: Universal features of elections]

And¹² the root which is necessary in each [kind], and about which we have confidence with respect to those things which we undertake in them, is that we must undertake to adapt the universal things: that is, [1] the Moon (who has a signification in every beginning, place, time, and for every man), and [2] the Sun (who is in charge in the circle, like a king),¹³ and [3] the star which signifies the matter which we want to undertake (as is Venus in getting be-

⁹ This opening hearkens back to Sahl's *On Elect.* §1, which also speaks of other unnamed astrologers who prefer not to elect for unknown nativities. But like al-'Imrānī, Sahl (§§3a-5a) believes that we can use the chart of a question as a root for proper elections. (Al-'Imrānī also believes that certain general things can be done for people with unknown nativities, as we will see.)

¹⁰ *Congruum.*

¹¹ Namely, those who overlook the next-best option.

¹² For this paragraph, cf. Sahl §§20-21c.

¹³ That is, the Sun is in the middle of all of the planets, in the order from Moon to Saturn.

trothed, Jupiter for assets), and likewise [4] the sign which signifies that nature which we are undertaking, so if we want to enter the sea, one must adapt a watery sign (that is, if [the sign] were cleansed of the bad ones and their aspects, let it be made the Ascendant, or let the Moon or the lord of the Ascendant be in it, and other things like these).

However,¹⁴ things which are not extremely necessary (but some must be considered), both for those whose nativities we knew, and for those whose [nativities] we do not know, are namely these: that we should choose a masculine sign in masculine matters, and a feminine one in feminine matters, and what is like these.

[Chapter I.1.3: Particular features of elections]

And if we set forth¹⁵ the fitness of these universal things (that is, the Sun and the Moon, also the star which naturally signifies the matter to be commenced), then one must adapt the particulars.

The first of them is that we adapt the house which signifies the matter about which it is asked. And for those whose nativities we knew, one must adapt the house which signifies that in the root of the nativity as well as the house which signifies it at the hour of the election.¹⁶ But for those whose nativities are not known, we will adapt the house signifying the matter at the hour of the election.

But [one must also] adapt the Ascendant and the fourth and their lords:¹⁷ not so much that the matters may be perfected, but even so that the body and soul would be made fit, and the end—whether the nativity is known or not.

But which house¹⁸ is said to be the one signifying [the matter] at the hour of the election and in the nativity, is established as being not of the universal things, and here is such an example: the second house from the Ascendant signifies assets in this hour and in that same land; and in this same [land] and

¹⁴ Cf. *Carmen* V.4.5, and Sahl §18.

¹⁵ *Praemiserimus*.

¹⁶ For instance, suppose it is a fifth-house election, and the client has Capricorn in her natal fifth. But, for some reason at the time of the election, it is best to have (say) Cancer on the fifth. In that case, we should make sure that both Capricorn and Cancer are made well fit at the time of the election.

¹⁷ Cf. Sahl §26.

¹⁸ Al-ʿImrānī, means “which domicile,” or “exactly which degrees of a sign.”

Chapter VII.78: On learning singing and other entertaining things⁵⁸¹

In this it is appropriate to adapt the Moon, Venus, and Mercury, because these are the roots of this matter; and that Venus be in one of her own dignities, and likewise Mercury would be applying to her. And likewise, the Moon should be in one of her own dignities or in Pisces, or separating herself from Mercury and applying to Venus.

And the Ascendant should be a sign agreeing with this matter, and Venus should have a dignity in it. And if Venus and Mercury both had dignity in the degree of the Ascendant (such as that it would be the house of one and the bound of the other), it will be best; nor should Venus nor the Moon, nor Mercury, be remote from the angles, unless the Moon would be in the ninth house (because it is the house of knowledge) and she were made fortunate and strong there—it does not signify evil nor harm in this matter, but rather it signifies the completion of the matter, with the other significators appearing fortunate and strengthened just as we said before.

And likewise, if the lord of the Ascendant were in the ninth, made fortunate and strong, it will be the best.

And some sages say that for learning the *oud*⁵⁸² and what is like that, it is good that the Moon should be in Capricorn. And for learning the tambourine⁵⁸³ and what is like that, it is good that the Moon be at the end of Leo. And for learning the trumpet and every other instrument which is played with the mouth, it is good that she be in signs not having a voice, or which are mute. And for learning to sing notes,⁵⁸⁴ or reading [aloud], it is good that she be in signs having a voice, and particularly in Gemini and Virgo.

And with all of this, adapt the ninth house and its lord. And for those of them whom you see are reaching for a mastery,⁵⁸⁵ likewise adapt the tenth house and its lord, because it is good for every beginning in masteries.

⁵⁸¹ See al-'Imrānī II.10.2.

⁵⁸² *Illud* (“that”), which cannot be right because the Latin al-'Imrānī specifically says “playing the lyre.” Perhaps the Castilian manuscript read *aloud* (from *al-oud*, “the *oud*”), which was later mis-corrected in the Latin to *illud*.

⁵⁸³ *Tamburum*.

⁵⁸⁴ *Notatos*. I believe this must mean reading written musical notes: this would involve the Mercurial art of reading and writing.

⁵⁸⁵ *Intendere...ad maneriem magisteriorum*.

THE ELEVENTH HOUSE

Chapter VII.93: On the eleventh house and its elections

These are the elections of this house: beginning matters which a man does for having a good name and a good reputation; demanding some petition; fulfilling promises; and seeking love and friendship.

Chapter VII.94: On matters which happen for the sake of acquiring a good name and reputation⁶⁵²

It is appropriate in the beginning⁶⁵³ that you make the eleventh house and its lord fit, and you should make the Ascendant be one of the signs of Jupiter. And it will be better if you could put Jupiter in the eleventh house or in the Ascendant, or aspecting them from a good aspect. And it is even appropriate that Jupiter should be strengthened and safe from the infortunes. And if the lord of the eleventh were in the Ascendant, or the lord of the Ascendant in the eleventh, it is likewise good.

And it is good that the Sun be safe from the infortunes and in the tenth, and the Moon applying to him from a trine or sextile. And if in addition the Moon were separating herself from the lord of the eleventh or from Jupiter, it will be better, because it signifies that the matter will be renowned, manifest, and complete.

And it even agrees with all [of this] that the significators be aspecting one to the other from good aspects, and particularly [aspecting] the luminaries and the Ascendant and the eleventh,⁶⁵⁴ and that they should be received. And if you could not make all of them fit, adapt whichever of them you could, always by guarding the roots of the elections.

⁶⁵² Cf. al-'Imrānī II.12.1.

⁶⁵³ Reading with al-'Imrānī, rather than “that you make the beginning of the eleventh house fit...”.

⁶⁵⁴ Reading *undecimam* with al-'Imrānī, for *decimam* (“tenth”).