

# INTRODUCTION

This is the third and probably final volume of *Persian Nativities*, the natal installment of my *Essential Medieval Astrology*, a projected series of translations which will redefine the contours of traditional astrology.<sup>1</sup> It contains *On the Revolutions of the Years of Nativities* (*On Rev. Nat.*) by Abū Ma'shar, one of the most famous of medieval astrologers. Later in 2010 I will begin to release horary works and new translations of introductory works such as al-Qabīsi's *Introduction to Astrology* and Abū Ma'shar's *Abbreviation of the Introduction*.

**Please note:** readers new to the vocabulary of profections, distributions, and so on, may find it best to begin with §§1-2, then to familiarize themselves with the particular techniques in §§6-14, finally returning to the delineation principles in §§3-5 and the final remarks in §§15-16.

## §1: *Abū Ma'shar*

Abū Ma'shar Ja'far bin Muhammad al-Balkhi was born around 10:00 p.m. on August 10, 787, near Balkh, Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> He was initially an astrology skeptic, but around the age of 47 he is said to have been introduced to astrology by the famous Arab polymath, al-Kindī. From that point on, Abū Ma'shar became a prolific astrological writer and wielded great influence in both the Arabic and Latin astrological worlds. Several important works of his were translated into Latin by the mid-1100s, but many more still exist in Arabic alone. His work may even have been instrumental in introducing Aristotelian philosophy into the Latin West, courtesy of his *Great Introduction to the Knowledge of the Judgments of the Stars* (*Gr. Intr.*), a large work defending astrology as a science and presenting all aspects of astrology's basic concepts and ways of looking at signs, houses, planets, and Lots. He died on March 8 or 9, 886.

*On Rev. Nat.* presents Abū Ma'shar's version of what had by his time become a standard suite of regular predictive techniques. Most of these techniques had been described by earlier Greek-speaking astrologers, though not always in the same books or as techniques to be used together.<sup>3</sup> But by

---

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix E.

<sup>2</sup> See his nativity (established as such by Pingree) in III.1 below.

<sup>3</sup> Based on a comparison of Abū Ma'shar with 'Umar's *Carmen* and parallel texts on transits in Schmidt 1995 (p. 5), it is evident that Abū Ma'shar had access to a different edition of Dorotheus—perhaps Māshā'allāh's text or even a Greek version. See below, §8.

the mid-7<sup>th</sup> Century (at the latest), Persian astrologers had worked these techniques into a package which fell under the general scheme of the “cycle” or “revolution” or “change-over” of the year. Nowadays we often refer to solar “returns,” but traditionally the cycle or revolution was a time to re-appraise the nativity in light of several overlapping techniques, some of which lasted more than a year and were not strictly related to the Sun’s annual return. The revolution was also a time at which certain planets were said to hand over responsibility for the native’s life to other planets, which “took turns” at “steering” the native’s life in various respects—hence it was sometimes spoken of as the “handing over” of the year.

The current translation does not represent all of *On Rev. Nat.* By the time Pingree wrote his 1968 critical edition of the medieval Greek version, at least four complete Arabic manuscripts were known to exist, along with an epitome by one of Abū Ma’shar’s students in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century (al-Sijzi). There may be more yet. But these complete and epitomized Arabic versions have never been translated: instead, in the late 10<sup>th</sup> Century it was partially translated into Greek, and that work was the basis of a Latin version in about 1262 AD. *Persian Nativities III* is based on this Latin version, with references to Pingree’s Greek.

The fact that *On Rev. Nat.* was never fully translated, and that it only appeared in Latin in the 1260s, is significant for medieval astrology. For the majority of the key Latin translations of Perso-Arabic astrology had been completed in the 1100s, with others by people such as Salio of Padua in the early 1200s. Māshā’allāh’s own briefer but similar account of the Persian methods had indeed been translated by Hugo of Santalla in 1140 or 1141 as Book IV of the Latin *Book of Aristotle*; but as I mentioned in my introduction to it in *Persian Nativities I*, Hugo’s style was difficult and unpopular: thus an early opportunity for Western astrologers to practice the Persian methods was largely lost. So it was that influential astrologers and encyclopediasts such as Guido Bonatti did not have robust versions of this material, but instead had to rely on the thumbnail sketches found in the translations of ‘Umar al-Tabarī, Abū Bakr, and al-Qabīsī.<sup>4</sup>

Modern people interested in and practicing traditional astrology still feel this lack of a complete translation, because much material pertaining to

---

<sup>4</sup> I have translated the material by ‘Umar and Abū Bakr in *Persian Nativities II*, and will publish my own translation of al-Qabīsī in 2010. Abū Bakr did write his own short work on revolutions which contains much of the basic material, but it does not seem to have been popular in its Latin incarnation, and I do not know when it was originally translated.

techniques such as transits and profections is still unavailable. To give the reader a sense of what is missing from this translation, consider the following table of contents originally in Arabic, which represent the missing portions (except for the italicized IX.7, which does appear in this work):

## **VI. On the Conditions of the Planets and Signs**

- VI.1: On the Lord of the period
- VI.2: On the periods of the signs in the nativity, and on the assigning of degrees
- VI.3: On the significations of the sign of the year or of the horoscope of the revolution
- VI.4: On the significations of the arrival of the year in a sign
- VI.5: On the significations of the planets in the pivots of the nativity
- VI.6: On the significations of the Lords of the places

## **VII. On the Motion of the Planets through the Signs of the Year**

- VII.1: On the significations of the planets from the signs and places
- VII.2-9: On the significations of the planets and Nodes transiting the twelve places

## **VIII. On the Conditions of the Planets in the Parts of the Signs**

- VIII.1-7: On the significations of the planets in the domiciles of the planets
- VIII.8-14: On the significations of the planets in the bounds of the planets
- VIII.15: On the significations of the planets in the wells of the signs

## **IX. On the Knowledge of the Conditions of Men in the Months, Days, and Hours**

- IX.1: On the knowledge of the indicators of the months
- IX.2: On the knowledge of the condition of the first month
- IX.3: On constructing the chart of the revolution of the month
- IX.4: On temperaments<sup>5</sup>
- IX.5: On investigation the significations of the [other] eleven months

---

<sup>5</sup> Or perhaps, the “proper interpretive mixtures” of different parts of the chart.

IX.6: On the significations of the planets with respect to stable matters

IX.7: *On the indicators of the days and hours*

IX.8: On things breaking up<sup>6</sup>

IX.9: On the special indicators

It is easy to see that plenty of valuable material (and indeed the entire book) still needs to be translated from the Arabic.

§2: *The Persian annual predictive system*

*On Rev. Nat.* exemplifies well the suite of predictive techniques which we already saw in Book IV of Māshā'allāh's *BA*. But whereas *BA*'s treatment was often compressed and brief (especially given the style of Hugo's translation), *On Rev. Nat.* bursts with details and interpretive hints despite the large amount of missing material. Following are the main stages in a complete version of the annual predictive system according to *On Rev. Nat.*:<sup>7</sup>

1. The Ptolemaic Ages of Man.<sup>8</sup>
2. The profected Ascendant and its Lord (called the Lord of the Year or the *sālkhudāy*).
3. The distributor and its partner. The distributor is the bound Lord of the directed Ascendant (here called the *jārbakhtār*),<sup>9</sup> while the partner is any planet or ray encountered by the directed Ascendant.
4. The solar revolution (or solar "return"), noting especially where the calculated Ascendant of the year falls in the nativity, what its Lord is, and planets transiting in it. One also notes the prominence of the Lots in the revolutionary chart, according to both their natal and annually recalculated positions.
5. The Lords of the *firdāriyyāt* or "periods," and their sub-Lords.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Interrumpentibus*.

<sup>7</sup> These will all be described in some detail below.

<sup>8</sup> Described by Ptolemy in *Tet.* IV.10.

<sup>9</sup> Māshā'allāh restricted the use of "*jārbakhtār*" to the bound Lord of the directed *hilāj*. In III.3, Abū Ma'shar does include the directions of all of these *hilājes*, with their own *jārbakhtārs* and partners, but he seems not to emphasize them as much as he does the Ascendant. On the other hand, perhaps Abū Ma'shar means his delineation texts for the Ascendant's distributors and partners to be templates applicable to the other *hilājes*.

6. Transits at and throughout the solar revolution, particularly if a planet returns to its natal sign.
7. The Moon at and throughout the solar revolution.<sup>10</sup>
8. Directions of points within the charts of the annual and monthly revolutions, around the entire chart for that particular period. The effects will primarily hold only for that period.
9. The “Indian” ninth-parts.

For easy reference, the following table gives the locations of the major treatments of this material across *Persian Nativities* and al-Qabīsī. In the last rows I have included passages which describe the monthly and daily rulers, as well as natal directions generally (i.e., not strictly as part of the distributor-partner technique):

	<i>BA</i>	<i>TBN</i>	<i>Abū Bakr</i>	<i>On Rev. Nat.</i>	<i>Al-Qabīsī</i>
1. Ages of Man				I.7-8	
2. Protection	IV.1-7	II.4-6		II.1-22, II.24	IV.8
3. Distributor-partner	III.1.10, IV.8-13	II.2	I.17	III.1-8	IV.14
4. Solar revolution	IV.14-15			I.6, II.23	
5. <i>Firdāriyyāt</i>	III.17-25		I.16	IV.1-8	IV.20
6. Ingresses, returns	IV <i>passim</i>			V.1-9	IV.21
7. Moon	IV.1			II.22, III.8, V.10	
8. Directions in the revolution		II.3, II.5-6		II.1, III.1	IV.13

<sup>10</sup> This material is mostly missing in the Greek and Latin versions.

9. Ninth-parts				III.9-10	IV.16-17
10. Monthly, daily, hourly rulers	IV.16			IX.7	
11. Natal directions	II.17, III.1.10	I.4, II.1, II.5-6	I.15		IV.11-12

Much of the rest of my Introduction will be devoted to Abū Ma’shar’s instructions and method, with occasional references to Māshā’allāh. But first I would like to get a few technical points out of the way.

First of all, Abū Ma’shar goes further than *BA* in its treatment of the revolutionary chart and house systems. In *BA* there were no explicit instructions to erect a separate revolutionary chart. Rather, Māshā’allāh gave the impression that the revolution should be considered as a set of annual transits, as though marked around the edges of the natal chart, with the calculated Ascendant of the year as a special point. In *On Rev. Nat.* we have the opposite: not only are we instructed to erect a separate chart, but in I.5 Abū Ma’shar practically suggests that natal positions should be marked around the edges of the revolutionary chart! Likewise, Māshā’allāh did not explicitly suggest or seem to use any house cusps in the revolution, apart from noting the location of the calculated Ascendant of the year (or “east of the year”). Abū Ma’shar explicitly endorses the use of quadrant-style house cusps. I do not know whether Abū Ma’shar himself decided upon these changes, or whether he was drawing upon older authors: only the translation of more works from Arabic will help us. But the difference between these two approaches is significant, both in the theoretical emphasis on the revolutionary chart and in the actual interpretations of houses.

Second, although Abū Ma’shar concentrates on the profecion of the Ascendant, he does also profect the Lot of Fortune and other key areas of the figure, just as in Hellenistic astrology. In addition, like ‘Umar al-Tabarī but unlike Māshā’allāh, Abū Ma’shar explicitly profects in 30° increments.<sup>11</sup>

Third, in III.7 he mentions briefly, but otherwise does not emphasize, the use of ascensional times in combination with the planetary years. This too is Hellenistic and can be found throughout Vettius Valens. Perhaps the missing Arabic chapters contain more information on them.

---

<sup>11</sup> IX.7.

Fourth, in I.9 Abū Ma’shar does allow the possibility of using a dead native’s chart to continue speaking about his or her children, as a “second report”; and one may use a dead native’s chart to continue speaking about his or her still-living father. One occasionally reads cryptic comments along these lines in medieval natal astrology, but rarely with such explicitness.

Fifth, *On Rev. Nat.* gives advice on how to differentiate between public and private expressions of the planets,<sup>12</sup> as well as the source of the effects. As to their public nature, the angularity of a planet (especially if in both the nativity and the revolution) makes the effects not only stronger, but more public and evident; cadence (especially if cadent in both) diminishes evils and makes them less public, even if they are still evident to those close to the native. If the planets are in aversion to the Ascendant,<sup>13</sup> they are more clandestine. But if the planets are in aversion and yet aspected by an angular planet, something of the effect will be public over time; if the planet in aversion is actually conjoined with the angular planet, then the native will be the one to disclose it.<sup>14</sup>

As to the sources of the effects, this is often a function of dignities:<sup>15</sup> if the planet (usually the Lord of the Year)<sup>16</sup> is in one of its own dignities, the effects will come from some known direction or a friend; but if in a peregrine or alien sign, from a stranger or an unexpected or unknown direction, or while in a foreign land. However, other classifications are useful: if in a watery sign, while on or near water; if in a four-footed sign, from animals.<sup>17</sup>

### §3: *Approaching the chart: stages and principles*

In the first part of Book I, Abū Ma’shar provides a general way of approaching the chart during any given year. The first step is to determine the native’s age according to the Ptolemaic Ages of Man, and to analyze the

---

<sup>12</sup> See I.3.

<sup>13</sup> That is, in signs which cannot aspect the rising sign (whether in the nativity or the revolution): the twelfth, eighth, sixth, and second, but with emphasis on the first three.

<sup>14</sup> This must assume that the planet in aversion represents the native—either by being the protected Lord of the Year or the distributor.

<sup>15</sup> See for example II.4 and *BA* IV.2.

<sup>16</sup> In II.4 he uses the Lord of the Year in an example with the Lot of Fortune: if the Lord of the Year aspects or rules the Lot, then the Lord’s own dignities where it is will show the source, just as described here.

<sup>17</sup> II.5.

planet ruling that age, both natively and by transit.<sup>18</sup> Then, one should analyze the empirical circumstances of the native's life, such as his social status, habits, character, capacities—which, one supposes, might simply involve asking the native. This provides us an opportunity to emphasize that astrology is not a form of psychism, but is a consulting profession akin to medicine or law. For doctors do not simply look at charts and perform tests, but they interview patients in order to obtain the context for the consultation: this allows doctors to diagnose and offer advice. Likewise, attorneys cannot simply predict how a case will unfold, or how to argue their case, until they can go beyond affidavits and documents and interview actual witnesses. Astrologers too must ask questions and obtain biographical information which may not be strictly contained in the chart, and sometimes one needs to know how a given feature of the chart has actually manifested. For instance, a chart may show someone of higher status, but status is often relative to one's own community and not absolute. Thus a nativity might show someone actually middle-class or of average influence, but astrologically there is evidence of being very influential *within* one's own middle-class group. Or, some predictive techniques make it difficult to know whether someone is sick, or dead, or just having a disastrous year: it helps to know how the native is actually doing, in order to provide a general context for delineation and prediction.

After establishing the general context, Abū Ma'shar divides the various significators into three groups, in order to help the astrologer identify how the native will be affected by each feature of the charts.<sup>19</sup> The first group identifies significators of the native's body: all of these are places receiving aspects and influences, just as matter is traditionally thought to be passive and receptive of other things, without being active on its own. These significators allegedly show such influences and therefore effects on bodily health. The second group identifies significators of the native's soul and attitudes, and they are especially the Lords of the aforementioned places: they are understood to be more active, just as reason and spirit are active as compared to passive matter. If all or many of the significators of the body and soul are in good places or unharmed, then there will not only be a favorable concord between body and soul for that time, but they will have

---

<sup>18</sup> I.7, I.9. I will not describe the Ages of Man in this Introduction. Readers are directed to the chapters in *On Rev. Nat.* and *Tet.* IV.10.

<sup>19</sup> See II.2.



durability and a good bearing in life.<sup>20</sup> The third group identifies signifiers pertaining to “movements and operations,” which could refer to combinations of the first two types of effects, or rather how the mind and body cooperate together to produce actions.

Although this threefold classification is intriguing and has precedents in other medieval material, I am skeptical of its use simply because the delineations given later by Abū Ma’shar often deal indiscriminately with effects on the body, soul, actions, other people, and so on. Of course, it is also possible that some of these delineations are simply archetypal, and one may use the threefold classification to distinguish the bodily from the mental effects within the range of possibilities listed.

Nevertheless, one might reasonably ask how to tell which significations matter or are more likely to manifest. For especially if we are dealing with two separate charts (the nativity and the revolution), we will have dozens of different aspects, placements, planetary conditions, and so on—how can we sort the wheat from the chaff? A close reading of *On Rev. Nat.* and other sources yields three basic delineation principles, which I will illustrate with examples:

1. *The priority of the nativity.* The nativity provides the basic pattern for life, setting the tone for general goods and evils. Any feature of the revolution shows variations, occasional and temporary trends, and intensifications or slackenings of what is *already* signified or possible in the nativity, not only for absolute issues such as having children or not, but for the changes in ongoing matters such as wealth and reputation. So, if a planet signifies something in both the nativity and the revolution, it will perfect that signification in a great way, and it might be *inevitable and unchangeable*.<sup>21</sup> If however a planet signifies something in the nativity, but the indications in the revolution prevent it (or vice versa), one should go with the chart with the stronger signification, but its influence will still be moderated:<sup>22</sup> for “the signification of the nativity does not become inactive on account of a revolution.”<sup>23</sup> If the nativity seems to deny the possibility of children but a revolution indicates it, then perhaps the native will adopt; or if the nativity denies a spouse, perhaps at a revolution indicating marriage he will take on a

---

<sup>20</sup> II.2.

<sup>21</sup> II.5.

<sup>22</sup> II.5.

<sup>23</sup> I.3.

concubine.<sup>24</sup> Māshā'allāh provides the example that if the Lord of the Year and/or the distributor are in a bad condition in the nativity but in a good one in the revolution, there will still be some good even though the nativity for the most part does not signify it.<sup>25</sup> Let me draw this out a bit with a few examples:

- If the Ascendant of the revolution (or the sign of the profection) falls on a *natal* configuration (especially on an important one), then what it indicates will be activated in a more lasting and powerful way than if there were only a planet there *by transit* at the revolution.<sup>26</sup> So, the Ascendant on a natal configuration involving Mars will activate that Mars more strongly than if Mars only happened to be transiting on the Ascendant of the revolution.
- Likewise, if the Ascendant of the year (or the sign of the profection) is on a natal planet, then that planet can (possibly) act more powerfully as a substitute Lord of the Ascendant of the year precisely because it is a natal planet.<sup>27</sup>
- Remember that in a revolution there are *three* Ascendants to watch: the natal Ascendant, the sign of the profected Ascendant, and the Ascendant of the year. While the sign of the profection and the Ascendant of the year are each relevant to how the year as a whole goes, the Ascendant of the year and its Lord are *partners* to the profection because the profection is more closely tied to the original meaning of the nativity.

This notion of the revolution as a temporary variation on the nativity also provides Abū Ma'shar a model for criticizing other approaches to the revolution—in this case, I believe he is criticizing 'Umar al-Tabarī<sup>28</sup> and Māshā'allāh.<sup>29</sup> Now, Abū Ma'shar recommends<sup>30</sup> that we direct many points *within* and *around* the revolutionary chart, both in that of the annual revolution and that of monthly revolutions: for example, one should direct the

---

<sup>24</sup> I.9.

<sup>25</sup> *BA* IV.14.

<sup>26</sup> Extrapolating from many statements in II.24.

<sup>27</sup> III.8.

<sup>28</sup> See *TBN* II.

<sup>29</sup> See *BA* IV.1.

<sup>30</sup> III.1.