



ABŪ MA'ŠAR

ABŪ MA'ŠAR JA'FAR B. MOḤAMMAD BALĪ, astronomer and astrologer, born in Balk on 20 Šafar 171/10 August 787. Abū Ma'šar (called Albumasar in Medieval Latin, Apomasar in Byzantine Greek) must have received his early education in that cosmopolitan city and acquired there his strong sense of the intellectual primacy of Iran among the nations of the Eurasian continent. He came to Baghdad in the early 3rd/9th century as an expert on Hadith, but by the late 820's—apparently as the result of a dispute with al-Kendī—had taken up the study of astronomy and astrology. In this study he drew upon all of the intellectual traditions current in the early 'Abbasid caliphate: Greek, Indian, Sasanian, Syrian, and pre-Islamic Arabic. His astrological theories, though derived from these diverse source, were founded upon that Neoplatonizing concept of the universe associated with the self-styled Sabean of Ḥarrān. They hypothesized three levels of being analogous to three concentric spheres: the divine (the sphere of light), the ethereal (the celestial spheres), and the hylic (the sublunar core in which the four linearly moving elements—earth, water, air, and fire—are in a constant process of change). The sciences of astrology and theurgy are, in this system, the most useful to man, as they are concerned with the relationships that are assumed to persist between the two lower spheres.

Each star has particular power over a certain quality, humor, color, taste, etc., and certain genera, species, etc. in the hylic world. Together they effect all the physical and some of the psychological changes perceptible to and experienced by man, as they rotate in eternal patterns about the center and



alter their positions relative to each other and to the local horizon. Those changes, it was thought, could be scientifically predicted by means of astrology. Man, however, whose soul has descended from the sphere of light, possesses free will and the potentiality of using the astrological relationships of the hylic world to the ethereal in order to alter his environment and eventually reascend to the empyrean. He does this by manipulating the appropriate elemental objects and by performing a specified liturgy. This art of astral magic is called theurgy.

Abū Mašar expounds the astrological theory of the Harranians in his *Ketāb al-madkāl al-kabīr* (“Great introduction”), which became the basic handbook on astrology not only for Islam, but also, through various translations, for Byzantium and western Europe as well. He also wrote a large number of other astrological treatises; some were general, some very specific, some compendia of the opinions of others; but all were extremely influential. Of less importance, but present, are some writings on the talismans used in theurgy and on the planetary temples in which was performed the liturgy of the Harranians. Abū Mašar asserted that the Sabean astrological religion was the original and true belief taught to the earliest man by God. He also invented a history of astronomy that was a corollary of that belief. An original astronomical theory have been revealed to the first three Hermes figures (Hermes was the prophet of Ḥarrān), who was identified with Hūšang and with Enoch-Edrīs. This theory was preserved in its pure state, through a manuscript buried in Isfahan before the Flood, only in Iran; other nations received and corrupted different versions of it. In fact the astronomical system that Abū Mašar expounded, allegedly on the basis of the manuscript buried in Isfahan, is a weird conglomeration of ideas derived from Indian, Sasanian, and Greek sources, and rather displays the diversity of traditions that he was familiar with than his powers of synthesis. His most important books on this “antediluvian” astronomy were the *Ketāb al-olūf* (“Book of thousands”), and the *Zīj al-hazārāt* (“Astronomical tables of the thousands”).

In the *Ketāb al-olūf* Abū Mašar also dealt with a branch of astrology that had been much cultivated in Sasanian Iran. This involves the interpretation of history on the basis of conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter and the rotations through the zodiac of various imaginary points (styled *enteḥāʾ* and *qesma*). In this astrological history, dynasties and religious sects are assigned fixed terms. A transfer of power from one people to another should occur once every 240 or 480 years, and a new prophet 240 or 480 years, and a new prophet should



arise in every millenium. Therefore Persian nationalists (of whom Abū Maʿšar was one) based numerous predictions on this theory. In the early 9th century they predicted the imminent collapse of the rule of the Arabs and the restoration of the domination of Iran. Abū Maʿšar's most important contribution to the subject was his *Ketābal-qerānāt* ("Book of conjunctions"). This also was translated into Latin, and it exercised a widespread influence in late Medieval and Renaissance Europe.

Through such works Abū Maʿšar attained a position of preeminence among contemporary astrologers, and his enormous reputation has lasted to this day. In reading the *Moḍākarāt Abī Maʿšar* ("Sayings of Abū Maʿšar") of his pupil Šāḍān (in Arabic, Greek, or Latin), one is constantly made aware of his fame and of his influence; he was even consulted by the king of Ceylon at the nativity of one of his sons. But we are also told tales that illustrate not only his intelligence and cleverness, but also his charlatanry and intellectual dishonesty, on which Bīrūnī on several occasions makes appropriate comments. Abū Maʿšar died at Wāseṭ at the age of 100 on 29 Ramaḏān 272/9 March 886.

Works: I. Astronomy: 1. *Zīj al-hazārāt*, written about 840-60 A.D., lost. See D. Pingree, *The Thousands of Abū Maʿšar*, London, 1968, pp. 27-57, etc. 2. *Zīj al-qerānāt wa'l-ekṭerāqāt* ("Tables on conjunctions and transits"), lost. 3. *Ketāb hay'at al-falak wa eḳtelāf ṭolū'eh* ("Form of the sphere and differences in rising times"), lost. 4. *Ketāb eḳtelāf al-zījāt* ("Book of the differences between tables"), lost. See Pingree, *Thousands*, pp. 3-4, 128-30).

II. Astrology: A. General. 1. *Ketāb al-madḳal al-kabīr 'alā 'elm aḥkām al-nojūm*, written about 235/849-50. Many Arabic manuscripts are extant; a critical edition is being prepared by R. Lemay of both the Arabic and the two Latin versions of John of Seville (Johannes Hispalensis, 1133) and (with some abridgments), by Hermann of Carinthia (Hermannus Secundus, 1140). Hermann's translation was published by E. Ratdolf at Augsburg in 1489 and 1495, and by J. Pentius Leucensis at Venice in 1506. Excerpts from the Arabic were translated into Greek about 1000, and are now included in the third book of the *Mysteries of Abū Maʿšar*, of which a critical edition is being prepared by D. Pingree. Dependent on the Latin are a Hebrew version made by Yakob ben Elia in the late 13th century (M. Steinschneider, *Die hebräischen Übersetzungen des Mittelalters*, Berlin, 1893, pp. 567-71) and the *Liber Albumazarus* composed by Zothorus Zeparus Fendulus in the 14th century. See K. Dyroff in F. Boll, *Sphaera*, Leipzig, 1903, pp. 490-539; P. Duhem, *Le système du monde* II, Paris,



1914, pp. 369-86; H. Hermelink, “Datierung des Liber Introductorius von Albumasar (*Kitāb al-muḍḥal al-kabīr* von Abū Ma'šar),” *Sudhoffs Archiv* 46, 1962, pp. 264-65; R. Lemay, *Abū Ma'šar and Latin Aristotelianism in the Twelfth Century*, Beirut, 1962; D. Pingree, “The Indian Iconography of the Decans and Horas,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 26, 1963, pp. 223-54; J. C. Vadet, “Une défense de l'astrologie dans le muḍḥal d'Abū Ma'šar al-Baḥḥī,” *Annales Islamologiques* 5, 1963, pp. 131-80. 2. *Ketāb al-madḳal al-šaḡīr* (“Little introduction”). Several Arabic manuscripts are extant. It was translated into Latin by Adelard of Bath in the early 12th century. 3. *Ketāb etḡbāt 'elm al-nojūm* (“Book of the proof of astrology”), lost. 4. *Ketāb al-ṭabā'e' al-kabīr* (“Great book of natures”), lost. 5. *Ketāb al-sehām* (“Book of lots”). Lost in Arabic, but perhaps the original of two Latin translations. See Bīrūnī, *Book of Instruction in the Elements of the Art of Astrology*, ed. R. R. Wright, London, 1934, pp. 282-89.

B. Astrological History. 1. *Ketāb al-olūf*, summarized by Seǰzī, Tanūḳī, and others. See Pingree, *Thousands*, pp. 13-27, 56-68, etc. 2. *Ketāb al-qerānāt*, written about 870-85. Several Arabic manuscripts are extant; the Latin translation by John of Seville was edited by E. Ratdolf at Augsburg in 1489 and by J. Penteus de Leucho at Venice in 1515. See also O. Loth, “Al-Kindī als Astrolog,” *Morgenländische Forschungen*, Leipzig, 1875, pp. 261-310; Duhem, *Système II*, pp. 503-04. 3. *Ketāb taḡāwīl senī al-'ālam* (“Book of revolutions of the world-years”) or *Ketāb al-nokat* (“Book of subtleties”). Several Arabic manuscripts are extant; the Latin translation by John of Seville under the title *Flores* (cf. J. Vernet, “Cuestiones catalográficas referentes a autores orientales: Problemas bibliograficos en torno a Albumasar,” *Biblioteconomia*, Barcelona, 1952, pp. 12-17) was published by E. Ratdolf at Augsburg in 1488, 1489, and 1495, and by the house of Sessa at Venice in 1488 and 1506. See P. Kunitzsch, “Abū Ma'šar, Johannes Hispalensis and Alkameluz,” *ZDMG* 120, 1970, pp. 103-25. 4. *Ketāb zā'erjāt al-entehā'āt wa'l-mamarrāt* (“Book of tables of the entehā'āt and of the transits”), lost. 5. *Ketāb eqterān al-naḡsayn fī borǰ al-saraṭān* (“Book of the conjunction of the two malefics in Cancer”), lost. 6. *Ketāb al-sahmayn wa a'mār al-molūk wa'l-dowal* (“Book of the two lots and the lives of kings and dynasties”), lost. 7. *Ketāb fī boyūt al-'ebādāt* (“Book of temples”), lost.

C. Genethliology. 1. *Ketāb al-mawālīd al-kabīr* (“Great book of nativities”), lost. 2. *Ketāb al-mawālīd al-šaḡīr* (“Small book of nativities”), perhaps related to the *Ketāb al-moḡaqqeq al-yūnānī al-faylasūf al-šahīr be Abī Ma'šar al-Falakī* (“Book



of the meticulous investigator, the Greek philosopher known as Abū Maʿšar al-Falakī”), which has been published several times in Cairo. See J. M. Faddegon, “Notice sur un petit traité d’astrologie attribué à Albumasar (Abū-Maʿšar),” *Jabal ʿĀmel* 213,1928, pp. 150-58. 3. *Ketāb al-ĵamhara* (“Book of the multitude”), lost. 4. *Ketāb aṣl al-oṣūl* (“Book of the foundation of the foundations”). Most manuscripts attribute this valuable collection of astrological sayings of the ancients to Abu’l-ʿAnbas al-Ṣaymarī (828 50 888-89 A.D.). 5. *Ketāb aḥkām al-mawālīd* (“Book of judgments about nativities”). Two works of this title ascribed to Abū Maʿšar are extant. The first was apparently translated into Persian (Storey, II/1, p. 39), while the second was summarized by Seǰzī. 7. *Ketāb al-haylāj* (“Book of the prorogator”), lost; but perhaps these two books were summarized by Seǰzī. 8. *Ketāb al-qawāṭīʿ ʿala’l-haylājāt* (“Book of the severances of life according to the prorogators”), lost. 9. *Ketāb al-mezājāt* (“Book of mixtures”), lost, but perhaps summarized by Seǰzī. 10. *Ketāb qerānāt al-kawākeb fi’l-borūǰ al-eṭna’ašara* (“Book of conjunctions of the planets in the twelve signs”). At least one Arabic manuscript is extant; a Greek translation was published in *Catalogus codicum astrologorum Graecorum* II, Brussels, 1900, pp. 123-30. 11. *Ketāb taḥwīl senī al-mawālīd* (“Book of the revolutions of the years of nativities”). Several Arabic manuscripts are extant; it was also summarized and translated into Persian by Seǰzī (Storey, II/1, p. 39). The first five books were translated into Greek about 1000 A.D. (ed. D. Pingree, Leipzig, 1968); the Greek was turned into Latin in the 13th century (ed. H. Wolf, Basel, 1559). 12. *Ketāb al-mayl fi taḥwīl senī al-mawālīd* (“Book of the obliquity [of the ecliptic] in the revolution of the years of nativities”), lost.

D. Elections. 1. *Ketāb al-eḳtīārāt* (“Book of elections”), perhaps extant in Arabic and in a summary by Seǰzī, and also in two Latin texts. 2. *Ketāb al-eḳtīārāt ʿalā manāzel al-qamar* (“Book of elections according to the lunar mansions”), perhaps extant in Arabic and in a Latin translation. 3. *Ketāb al-awqāt ʿalā eṭnā’ašarīyat al-kawākeb* (“Book of times according to the dodecatemori of the planets”), perhaps extant in Arabic.

E. Interrogations. 1. *Ketāb al-masāʿel* (“Book of interrogations”), perhaps extant in Arabic. 2. *Ketāb al-kāmel* (“The perfect book”), perhaps identical with the *Ketāb al-masāʿel*.

F. Meteorological astronomy. 1. *Ketāb al-anwāʿ* (“Star calendar”), lost. 2. *Ketāb al-amṭār wa’l-rīāḥ wa taǧayyor al-ahwīa* (“Book of rains and winds and of changes in the weather”), perhaps the *Ketāb al-serr* (“Book of the secret”), preserved in several manuscripts. 3. *Ketāb ṭabāʿe’ al-boldān wa tawallod al-rīāḥ*



(“Book of the natures of places and the generation of winds”), lost.

G. Astrological oneiromancy. 1. *Ketāb tafsīr al-manāmāt men al-nojūm* (“Book of the explanation of dreams from the stars”), lost.

III. Astral magic: 1. *Ketāb al-ṣowar wa'l-ḥokm 'alayhā* (“Book of the images and their influences”). A Latin version seems to be extant.

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