

**“Characterizing Astrology in the Medieval Islamic World” (May 12-14, 2015)**

Organized by Divinity students Shandra Lamaute and Elizabeth Sartell  
faculty sponsors Alireza Doostdar and James T. Robinson

Confirmed Speakers, Titles and Abstracts

KEYNOTE

**Reimund Leicht**, Department of Jewish Thought, Hebrew University  
“Characterizing Astrology in the Arab-Muslim World”

Although astral beliefs were probably part of the culture of pre-Muslim Ancient Arabia as well, as a well-ordered system of knowledge astrology was one of the sciences the Muslim-Arab culture adopted from the Hellenistic heritage. In fact, there is even evidence that the interest in astrology preceded that in philosophy and other Greek sciences. However, the acculturation of astrology among the other Greek sciences caused considerable problems in various fields of Arab-Muslim culture, which yielded different attempts to come to grips with this phenomenon and to find proper definitions for what astrology is about and how it should be characterized in religious, legal, philosophical and epistemological terms. It will be the topic of this paper to give a survey of the different approaches, which will provide a multi-faceted image of the highly ambiguous status of astrology in the Arab-Muslim world.

CONFIRMED SPEAKERS

**Godefroid de Callataÿ**, Institut des civilisations, arts et lettres, Université catholique de Louvain  
“Why was astrology so important to the authors of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*?”

The *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* include three epistles entirely devoted to ‘the science of the stars’ (*‘ilm al-nujūm*) – that is, epistles 3 (‘on astronomy’), 16 (‘on the heavens and the world’), and 36 (‘on cycles and revolutions’) –, in addition to countless other passages disseminated throughout the corpus. By reviewing this material, the present contribution will aim at elucidating why the authors of this unique encyclopedia made such an important use of *‘ilm al-nujūm*, especially in terms of its astrological implications for the sublunary world and its inhabitants. The paper will focus on certain theories in particular, such as the Great Year doctrine, the theory of Saturn-Jupiter conjunctions, and the 7,000-year cycles of prophethood, with the purpose of determining to which extent the authors could combine these theories with their own messianic expectations.

**Noah Gardiner**, Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of Michigan  
“Esotericist astrology in Aḥmad al-Būnī’s *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt fī al-ḥurūf al-'ulwīyāt*”

This paper examines astrological elements in the Ifrīqiyan Sufi occultist Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad al-Būnī’s *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt fī al-ḥurūf al-'ulwīyāt*, an important work on the cabalistic “science of letters and names” (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf wa-al-asmā'*) completed in Cairo in 621/1224. Of particular interest is al-Būnī’s insistence that he is not discussing astrology (*‘ilm aḥkām al-nujūm*), despite what appear to be clear references to it. I argue that this seeming contradiction is in keeping with the radically Qur’ān-oriented nature of al-Būnī’s occult praxis, in the context of which all “vulgar” astrology is merely a distorted reflection of initiated knowledge of the cosmos. I go on to suggest that his ideas and rhetorical strategies are in keeping with a tendency toward esotericism that emanated from the Islamicate West in the late-medieval period.

**Teri Gee**, Department of Physics, Brigham Young University Idaho  
 “Astrology vs. Astronomy in Abu Ma’shar’s *Kitab al-Madkhal al-kabir*”

Abu Ma'shar's *Kitab al-Madkhal al-kabir* is widely considered to be one of the more influential Arabic astrological texts, both in medieval Islam and in late medieval Europe. In Book I of this text, Abu Ma'shar presents a detailed defence of astrology, along with diatribes against those who would reject it. In this paper, I am looking at one of the methods Abu Ma'shar uses to defend astrology and condemn those who attack it. In sections two and five, he explicitly separates astrology (*'ilm al-nujum*) from *'ilm al-kull*, which includes both astronomy and cosmology in its purview. This separation would become more formalized in later centuries, but where later astronomers were attempting to separate *'ilm al-hay'a* from the more problematic *'ilm al-nujum*, Abu Ma'shar is using this separation to raise astrology to the pinnacle of the sciences, the highest and most noble of the all. The use of separation becomes a method of glorifying astrology rather than condemning it as would be seen later.

**Matthew Melvin-Koushki**, Department of History, University of South Carolina  
 “Conjuncting Astrology: The Interrelation of the Mathematical Occult Sciences in the Premodern Persianate Tradition”

In both theory and practice, the epistemological boundaries between the various physical (*ṭabīʿī*) and mathematical (*riyāzī*) sciences were rather porous in the premodern Persianate world. This was especially true for the mathematical occult sciences, including astrology (*'ilm-i nujūm*, *aḥkām-i nujūm*), lettrism (*'ilm-i ḥurūf*) and geomancy (*'ilm-i raml*), which were often held by their practitioners to be interdependent given their common derivation from number theory (*'ilm-i ʿadad*). Given such epistemological continuity, astrology was freely imported into the other mathematical occult sciences to enrich their interpretive frameworks and extend their practical applications. By the same token, astrology was ‘naturalized,’ or rendered operative in the sublunar realm, through its blending with both geomancy and lettrism. These two sciences were prized for their ability to bridge the natural-mathematical divide, the first considered to be a form of ‘terrestrial astrology’ whose binary code captures the flux patterns of the four elemental energies as a means to divine past, present and future events, and the second offering knowledge and control of the physical world via letter magic (*sīmiyā*) and letter divination (*jafr*), both thoroughly astrological, while also acting as an ideal vehicle for metaphysical speculation (*'ilm-i ilāhī*).

The mathematical occult sciences, in short, are best approached as a single philosophical-scientific complex predicated on an expressly neoplatonic-neopythagorean system. Taking as its focus the 12th-16th-century Persianate world, whose intellectual and political history is characterized by a great florescence of occultism (preceding then paralleling a similar florescence in Renaissance Europe), this paper first attempts a taxonomy of their interrelations on the basis of Persian classifications of the sciences (sg. *taṣnīf al-ʿulūm*) produced during these centuries. To show the actual mechanics of these interrelations, it then turns to two case studies: the relationship of astrology to lettrism as conceptualized and utilized by Timurid and Aqquyunlu court elites in western Iran, and the relationship of astrology to geomancy as conceptualized and utilized by Mughal court elites in northern India. Although Islamicate astrology is usually discussed in isolation or only in relation to astronomy (*'ilm-i hay'at*), its more ‘legitimate’ parent, I propose that its intellectual status among early modern Muslim elites cannot be properly apprehended except in conjunction with its fellow mathematical occult sciences.

**Robert Morrison**, Department of Religion, Bowdoin College  
 “Astrology as Jewish Philosophy”

This paper will examine the text *Urim ve-Tummim*, a Hebrew text on astrology composed in the fifteenth century probably in the Eastern Mediterranean. This text is highly significant in that it not only defends astrology, but, in fact, advocates astrology as a way to gain insight into one's religious obligations. Astrology does not contravene free will and may, in fact, be superior to Qabbalah. Further analysis of this text will provide more information about the fascinating intellectual world of Romaniot Jews.

**Enrico Raffaelli**, Department of Historical Studies, University of Toronto  
 “Astrology and Religion in the 9th-century Zoroastrian Texts”

This paper provides an overview of the history of astrology in the Iranian world from the pre-Islamic times to the early Islamic period. It highlights how, before and after the Islamization of Iran, astrology played a central role in the religious life of the Zoroastrian community. The paper then analyzes the interplay between astrology and religion in the Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts of Sasanian origin compiled in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. It highlights in particular how, in these texts, the traditional chronology of the cosmic history, as well as some traditional religious doctrines, were given an astrological interpretation.

**Josefina Rodriguez-Arribas**, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität-Erlangen-Nürnberg  
 “At the Service of Divination: Astrological Instruments and Astrological Techniques”

Divination implied always a technique, a specific way of performing calculation, and in a few cases also implied some technological device (like astrolabes and astronomical rings). Practitioners of divination made clear how to proceed to give a judgement as accurately as possible and how to be able to account for any possible aspect of the future (family, job, property, trips, illness, and death). This study is focused on astrological instruments and astrological texts in Latin, Arabic and Hebrew. This is not a systematic account of technical and technological tools associated with divination, but a reflection based on texts about how divination found its ways and its place in medieval thought and how many medieval scholars understood it as a rational, beneficial, and desirable task, despite its uncertainty (or precisely for it).

**Marla Segol**, Institute of Jewish Thought and Heritage, SUNY University at Buffalo  
 “Astrology, Medicine, Microcosm and Magic: The Mechanics of Theurgy in the Shiur Qomah, the Sefer Yetsirah, and their Interpreters”

This paper examines the hermeneutics of the human body articulated and applied in three 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century texts and in the work of their medieval interpreters. It focuses on changes to the hermeneutic of the body with the introduction of Arabic astrological models, and as such, on changes to its application in theurgic practice.

The Hebrew medical microcosm first appears in the work of Assaf ha Rofeh, who probably lived in Jundishapur, in the Southwest corner of Persia between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Centuries. The book contains anatomical descriptions, based on the idea that human body is a microcosm for the cosmos as a whole. The medical microcosm is adapted by later Jewish writers of the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> C works, the Shiur Qomah and the Sefer Yetsirah. These early works articulate a common reading of the body, asserting that it is legible, and that it can be read on many levels simultaneously to achieve a knowledge of its inner workings, of the cosmos, and their maker. Attaining this knowledge serves as an act of praise and

worship, while applying it literally transforms the viewer to resemble the divine. Later works such as Shabbetai Donnolo's 10<sup>th</sup> C *Sefer Hakhmoni* reinterpret the microsocm according to Genesis 1:26 (expressing the concept of human creation in the divine image), and according to astrological models adapted from Arabic sources. In this way they added another layer to the hermeneutics of the body, equating the ability to see the future with a human resemblance to the divine, who possesses ultimate knowledge of human nature and future events. Thus the hermeneutic and its applications change as astrology is added to theurgy, and the model for human imitation of the divine changes as well.

**Ahmet Tunç Şen**, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago  
 “An Ottoman Shaykh al-Islam in support of Astrology: Kemal Pashazade (d. 1534) and his Treatise on Talismans”

There is a relatively rich literature as to how astrology and astrologers became the target of several attacks and condemnations (mostly by theologians and jurists) during the medieval and early modern Islamicate history. Despite the fact that these studies focusing upon figures like al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyya, or Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya have added much to our understanding of the arguments directed against the practice of astrology in the Islamicate world, they nevertheless enhanced the assumption, which posits that astrology was always religiously frowned upon and categorically dismissed in the Islamicate history. This paper aims to challenge this assumption by introducing a rather unorthodox treatise, written by Kemal Pashazade, the famous Ottoman shaykh al-islam from the first half of the sixteenth century. Kemal Pashazade was a prolific writer and there are over 200 works (many of them are short *risalas*) attributed to him in the fields of theology, grammar, law and history. The treatise, which is the subject of this presentation, is a short one written at the request of the Ottoman sultan, Suleyman (r. 1520-1566). Although the treatise is about the talismans useful to prevent the plague and earthquake, the two most vexing problems of the sixteenth century Istanbul, Kemal Pashazade talks at great length on the importance and uses of the science of the stars. In my presentation I will explore Kemal Pashazade's postulates and link them to the proliferation of the so-called “occult” practices in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Ottoman scholarly and courtly circles.