

Medieval Persian Astrology: The Part of the Unseen

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In 1899 E.G. Browne (1862-1926), famed scholar of Persian studies, published an initial English translation of a rather obscure 12th century Persian text written in a genre referred to as ‘Mirrors for Princes’, from the German term *furstenspiegel*, collections of anecdotes and admonishments from Philosophers and Poets on the need for patronage of the Arts and Sciences mixed with reworked cultural traditions that promote justice through rulership, reflected upon contemporary rulers to whom these works were usually dedicated to. More famous titles in the loosely regarded genre include the Alexander Romance literature (3rd-14th c.), *Secreta Secretorum* (Secret of Secrets, 12th c., attributed to Abu Yahya ibn al-Batriq’s Arabic translation, *Kitab Sirr al-Asrar*, 9th c.), Nizam al-Mulk’s *Siyaset-nameh* (Book of Government, 11th c.) and Niccolo Machiavelli’s *Il Principe* (The Prince, 16th c.).

Chahar Maqala (Four Discourses) written by Nizami Arudi Samarqandi (d. 12th c.) was quickly recognized by Browne as the work of a contemporary of Omar Khayyam, famed medieval polymath, astrological counsel to the Seljuk Empire and alleged author to a more infamous body of poetical works. A more serious translation of the Four Discourses was rendered by Browne in 1921, combined with abridged translated research notes from Persian scholar Mirza Mohammad Qazvini and textual assistance from professional astrologer Walter Gornold (aka Sepharial, 1864-1929) and occult writer and Editor Ralph Shirley (1865-1946).¹ An underappreciated example of the medieval Persian-Arabic-Islamic astrological environment of the Near-East, complete with first-hand personal and professional recorded evidence from the author, a self-professed practicing astrologer, Nizami’s Four Discourses has been described by Browne as;

“one of the most important original sources for our knowledge of the literary and scientific conditions which prevailed in Persia for the two or three centuries preceding its composition”

A view into medieval culture as it was known in and around 1156CE Khorasan, the book, dedicated to an outlier prince of the Ghurid Dynasty when originally penned, contained four individual discourses on professional roles that were considered indispensable to a ruler's court, comprised of historical anecdotes centered on recognized authorities for each profession. The individual 'Discourses' were organized under the headings; Secretaries (administrators to state), Poets, Astrologers and Physicians, "for a wise King cannot do without these four persons", Nizami offers many luminaries in the Medieval Islamic tradition to explicate his discourses.

The cosmological worldview of medieval Persian language philosophers, astrologers as well as those with an advanced education was recognized in a Neo-Platonic chain of sympathy inhabited by gradient levels of Soul and Spirit, all reflected materially as Mineral, Vegetable, Animal, Human connected from the lowest forms of life on Earth to the Eternal One through the intermediaries of the Planets and the Elemental Forms of the tropical Zodiac. The natural effects of this worldview were adopted in some Muslim Intellectual circles as well, though often situated in Islamic terms. The Ikhwan al-Safa and their Fifty-Two Epistles are a prime example of the intricacy of philosophy and cosmology underpinning the medieval Persian and Arabic esoteric intellectual tradition.ⁱⁱ

Nizami's relation of this described worldview is a poignant summary of the rationale behind medieval astrological principles, especially how the physics of a geocentric model of the universe explained astrological influence, both meteorologically and individualistically;

'Now you must know that this world, which lies in the Hollow of the Heaven of the Moon and within the circle of this first Sphere, is called "the World of Growth and Decay". And you must thus conceive it, that within the concavity of the Heaven of the Moon lies the Fire, surrounded by the Heaven of the Moon; and that within the Sphere of the Fire is the Air, surrounded by the Fire, and within the Air is the Water, surrounded by the Air, while within the Water is the Earth, with the Water round about it. And in the middle of the earth is an imaginary point, from which all straight lines drawn from the Heaven of the Moon are equal... When the influences of these stars had acted on the peripheries of these elements, and had been reflected back from that imaginary central point, there were produced from the midst of the earth and water, by the aid of the wind

and the fire, the products of the inorganic world, such as mountains, mines, clouds, snow, rain, thunder, lightning, shooting stars, comets, meteors, thunder-bolts, halos, conflagrations, fulminations, earthquakes, and springs of all kinds, as has been explained in its proper place when discussing the effects of the celestial bodies'

The Third Discourse commends the value of Astrologers through ten different anecdotes; some related from historical record, others events experienced by the author directly. All ten serve the author's preliminary remarks regarding the attributes of any person who would call themselves 'Astrologer';

'So the astrologer must be a [wo/]man of acute mind, approved character, and great natural intelligence, though apparently (some degree of) folly, madness and a gift for soothsaying are amongst the conditions and essentials of this branch (of the subject)'

The "Folly and the Madness" are indicated in anecdotes that described correct astrological predictions drawn from poorly detailed horoscopic judgments. Offering a glimpse into the professional strata of medieval period astrologers, an example; a Seljuk Sultan wished to join the Caliph's military campaign under an auspicious astrologically elected time to maintain celestial harmony and bring favor on his efforts. All the astrologers in his court could not recommend an advantageous election due to an unfortunate alignment of planets. Perplexed, the Sultan consulted soothsayers outside of his court and found a charlatan who claimed to have consulted the stars and found the moment conducive to victory. The Sultan set out and proved successful in his military support of the Caliph, upon his return he summoned the court astrologers in anger and threatened them with death. They lamented and replied that their work was honest and could be checked by greater astrological authority Omar Khayyam in Khorasan. When the charts and delineations were sent for review Khayyam claimed that no true astrologer would have found the planetary conditions favorable. When the charlatan was called out he stated that he had risked the odds and made a contrary chance prediction, many versions of the story claim he was summarily beheaded. Three different 'astrologer' roles were being represented in this story indirectly, the 'All Knowing Philosopher' an Academic Astrologer, the 'Practitioners' or the court astrologers who must earn their keep through proper and constant application

of the Art (perhaps Nizami fits in this category?), and the ‘Soothsayer’ who sometimes is a charlatan though also deals in ‘Intuition’ and uses astrology as a gateway to prognostications or at least the opportunity to present what they do as such.

And so the last quality inherent in those who would call themselves an astrologer, which Nizami calls simply “a gift for soothsaying” is not related to either folly or madness, but rather the horoscopic conditions of an individual’s nativity;

‘And the Astrologer who would pronounce prognostications must have the Part of the Unseen in his own Ascendant, while the Lord of the Mansion of the Part of the Unseen must be fortunate and in a favourable position, in order that such pronouncements as he gives may be near the truth’

Those familiar with Western Predictive Astrology and in particular Medieval period techniques will recognize the “Part of the Unseen” in the example below as the “Arabic Part of Sun” if studying Zoller or perhaps the “Hermetic Lot of Spirit” if following more contemporary translations. Those only vaguely familiar with the use of Parts or their calculation may know of the ‘Part of Fortune’ (POF) the ‘Part of the Unseen’ is calculated in reverse to the POF and is considered reciprocal. All Parts or Lots are abstract points in a chart mathematically derived they have no analogous observable astronomical counterpart.

Anecdotes relevant to “a gift for soothsaying” and the Part of the Unseen in Nizami’s Four Discourses include an event that involved Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (973-1048CE) in Ghazna. Upon being imprisoned for embarrassing his patron with his predictive success drawn from a horoscope chart, al-Biruni was allowed visits and requests from only one of his servants, who took his provisions and messages to where he was held captive. After 6 months of running errands the servant was stopped one day by a “fortune-teller” while passing through the park, peddling for coins he offered something enticing, “One dear to thee is in affliction, but ere three days are past he will be delivered from that affliction, will be invested with a robe of honour and mark of favour, and will again become distinguished and ennobled”. When the servant rushed to al-Biruni with the news he laughed and told him not to loiter in the park. The very day came and the astrologer was surprisingly released

and showered with honors and titles, when amongst his peers again he related the story of the fortune-teller whom they summoned;

‘They found him quite illiterate, knowing nothing. Then Abu Rayhan said, “Hast thou the horoscope of thy nativity?” “I have,” he replied. Then he brought the horoscope and Abu Rayhan examined it, and the Part of the Unseen fell directly on the degree of his Ascendant, so that whatever he said, though he spoke blindly, came near the truth.’ⁱⁱⁱ

The consecutive ‘Anecdote’ (XXV), a first-person account from the author Nizami, who witnessed a divination involving a horoscope chart, though not proper astrological delineation.

‘I had in my employment a woman-servant, who was born on the 29th of Safar, A.H. 511 (July 1st, A.D. 1117), when the Moon was in conjunction with the Sun and there was no distance between them, so that in consequence of this the Part of Fortune and the Part of the Unseen both fell on the degree of the Ascendant. When she reached the age of fifteen years, I taught her Astrology, in which she became so skillful that she could answer difficult questions in this science, and her prognostications came mighty near the truth. Ladies used to come to her and question her, and the most of what she said coincided with the pre-ordained decrees of Fate.’

One day an old Mother came to this woman and inquired about her son, who had not been heard from for over four years. She inquired the Woman astrologer as to whether he was alive or dead and to the nature of his current condition. ‘So the woman-astrologer arose, took the altitude, worked out the degree of the Ascendant, drew out an astrological figure, and determined the positions of the stars; and the very first words she said were, “Thy son hath returned!”. The old woman was perturbed and insisted she tell whether he was alive or dead, not hopeless options, to which the woman astrologer told her to go home and check. She then found her son at the gate, unpacking a mule. Nizami’s reaction to the story was to seek an astrologically relevant explanation;

‘When I came home and heard tidings of this, I enquired of her, “By what indication didst thou speak, and from what house didst thou deduce this prognostication?” She answered, “I had not reached so far as this. When I had finished the figure of the Ascendant, a fly came and settled on

the number of the degree of the Ascendant, wherefore it so seemed in my mind that this young man had returned. When I had thus spoken, and the mother had gone to find out, it became as certain to me that he had come as though I actually saw him unloading his ass.” Then I perceived that it was the Part of the Unseen which had effected all this on the degree of the Ascendant, and that this [success of hers] arose from nothing else but this.’^{iv}

The idea of the Part of the Unseen was perplexing enough for Browne as a translator to employ the use of professional astrologers in an attempt to elucidate what would seem a key concept regarding the nature of medieval astrological prognostication. The exchange catalogued in the appendix to Browne’s translation should be considered a true representation of proper astrological historiography done in an honest effort to present the practitioners and participants reality. The following represents the extent to which each contributor knew of the ‘Part of the Unseen’ and what they deduced through research after examining the Anecdotes, shared through correspondences dated May-Oct 1920;^v

Mirza Mohammad: ‘*Sahmu’s-Sa’adat* and *Sahmu’l-Ghayb*. A full explanation of these terms, which I have translated as “Part of Fortune” and “Part of the Unseen”, is given in vol. I of the *Dictionary of the Technical Terms used in the Sciences of the Musalmans*, pp. 698-9. After defining the pronunciation and ordinary meaning (“arrow”) of *sahm*, and its special sense in Geomancy and Geometry, the article proceeds: – “With astronomers the term *sahm* means a definite portion of the zodiacal heaven. According to them, the ‘Parts’ (*sahm-ha*) are many, e.g. the ‘Part of Fortune’ (or ‘Happiness’: *Sahmu’s-Sa’adat*), also called by them the ‘Part of the Moon’; and the ‘Part of the Unseen’ (*Sahmu’l-Ghayb*)’

Mr. Ralph Shirley: “I have however little doubt that the last, *sahmu’s-sa’adat*, is the Arabic term for the ‘Part of Fortune’. Some old astrologers attached a good deal of importance to this, without, I imagine, much justification... Ptolemy laid great stress on it, but the author of the Text-book of Astrology remarks that ‘it must be rejected from a rational system of genethliology’. ‘Part of Mystery’ (*sahmu’l-ghayb*) conveys no meaning and I do not think anything can be found corresponding to this in the astrological books at present available... It looks as if the Arabs had some tradition here which does not find its place in any astrological

books extant.”

“I have, however, read so much on the subject of astrology that I question whether there is any likelihood of my being able to throw light on the ‘Part of the Unseen’. I cannot, think there is any reference to it in any known author on the subject. Astrologers of the present day look upon Neptune as the planet that gives psychic powers, and this is unquestionably correct.”

Mr. W. Gornold aka Sefharial: “As to the ‘Part of the Unseen,’ this appears from the context to be derived from a reversal of the method employed for the ‘Part of Fortune.’ The former is counted from the Moon to the Sun, and the latter from the Sun to the Moon, and the distance in the Zodiac is set off from the Ascendant.”

A century later serious investigation into the use of ‘Parts’ in horoscopy was reintroduced by Robert Zoller, Latinist and Medieval Astrologer, first in *The Arabic Parts in Astrology: A Lost Key to Prediction* (1980), and again in *Arabic Parts* (2002). His assessment of the ‘Part of the Unseen’, translated by him as “Part of Sun”, gives this technique a special place in chart delineation;

‘The use of the Part of the Sun is very interesting. Actually, the Part of the Sun as well as the Pars Hyleg and Part of Faith are interesting, as they all have to do with esoteric considerations and spiritual issues’.^{vi}

Borrowing from 13th century astrologer Guido Bonatti (d.1296), who in turn is leaning heavily on the works of 9th century astrologer Abu Mashar (787-886CE), Zoller translates from the Latin;

“The Pars Futurorum [i.e. the Part of the Sun] signifies...faith, prophecy, religion and the culture of God, secrets, cogitations, intentions and hidden things, and everything which is absent”^{vii}

Ben Dykes, translator of medieval astrological texts, questions the Lot of Spirit in this context of ‘absence’;

“In Perso-Arabic astrology it is often called the Lot of Absence or the Lot of the Hidden. “Absence” could be related to the fact that it was also used anciently to study travel (*Anth.* I.30); the “hidden” could also relate to the inner mind, as opposed to external physical fortune, signified by the Part of Fortune”^{viii}

Zoller’s practical use of this Part in a natal chart offers delineation of a person’s spiritual values “or the thing that they place highest in this world”.^{ix} The sources are admittedly vague. The Part of Sun is referred to by Abu Mashar’s student Shadan as the *Pars Futurorum*, which has been translated by as ‘Part of Things to Come’ and ‘Part of Things to Be’ by Zoller and Dykes, respectively. Based on what is evident in Nizami’s anecdotal evidence the Part of the Unseen is used to determine Truth or Verity. When associated with the Ascendant “or in a position which stands well in relation to the Ascendant” while regarding the “Lord of the Mansion” in the nativity of an astrologer “such pronouncements as [s/]he gives may be near the truth”. It could be reasonable then to determine the placement and quality of the Part of Sun in a chart a testimony to where and how the native experiences personal Truth or perhaps foreknowledge.

The Medieval Astrological Tradition has experienced a renaissance in the last 20 years, partly due to the type of disregard that was shown by early modern inheritors of the Tradition, that has offered students and researchers a plethora of texts and manuals written as introductory treatise or definition guides regarding planetary sympathy and rote technique. Too often the processes outlined in the Historical Astrological Corpus consist of recipe instructions that produce only surface delineations, broader strokes that only create a visualization that needs more detail. When today’s practitioners approach methods drawn from medieval culture what is required is sound instruction and practical example, not readily available when depending on Master’s from a bygone age. However mysterious the Part of Sun or Lot of Spirit may be, lucid examples of particular medieval astrological techniques are hard to come by for the horoscopic researcher, in this capacity E.G. Browne’s masterful assisted translation of the Four Discourses of Nizami Arudi may prove a unique and insightful source, perhaps inspiring a more contemporary and critical edition of this hidden gem.

ⁱ Edward G. Browne. Revised Translation of the Chahar Maqala (“Four Discourses”) of Nizami-I-Arudi of Samarqand, Followed by an abridged translation of Mirza Muhammad’s notes to the Persian text (London; Cambridge University Press, 1921) pp. 130-134 [Hereafter; Four Discourses]

ⁱⁱ Nader El-Bizri, ed. Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: The Ikhwan al-Safa and their Rasa’il (Oxford & New York; Oxford University Press, 2008)

ⁱⁱⁱ Four Discourses, Anecdote XXIV, pp. 66-67

^{iv} Four Discourses, Anecdote XXV, pp. 67-68

^v Four Discourses, Note XXIV, pp.131-164

^{vi} Robert Zoller. Arabic Parts (London; New-Library Limited, 2002) p.22 [Hereafter; Zoller, Arabic Parts]

^{vii} Zoller, Arabic Parts, p.21

^{viii} Ben Dykes. Introductions to Traditional Astrology: Abu Ma’shar & al-Qabisi (Minnesota; The Cazimi Press, 2010) p. 284 footnote 4

^{ix} Zoller, Arabic Parts p.22