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More-to-Know Box I

The Foundation of al-Manṣūr's Palatial City and Its Horoscope

Johannes Thomann

The earliest account that speaks about some astrologers choosing the best time for the foundation of al-Manṣūr's City is found in the geographical work of al-Ya'qūbī (d. 897). Therein, al-Ya'qūbī mentions two astrologers, Nawbakht (d. before 775) and Mashā'allāh (d. before 815), who are credited with determining the exact time for laying the palatial city's foundation stone. Nawbakht is also mentioned as one of the astronomers and mathematicians who quartered the round city.

Several more detailed accounts regarding the horoscope of al-Manṣūr's City are found in the geographical work of Ibn al-Faqīh, written in 902 or 903. According to the first account, the caliph al-Manṣūr ordered Nawbakht, his Persian court astrologer "to take the horoscope into account". Thus, the astrologer decided for the moment when the sun was in Sagittarius and at the ascendent. As will be shown later, this last statement is a mistake. Based on this horoscope, he forecasted the new city's duration of existence, the number of its buildings and what the inhabitants need to have in it. Finally, he revealed to al-Manṣūr that never a caliph would die in this city by a natural cause. In a second account, Ibn al-Faqīh gives the Hijra year and the date of the foundation in the Persian and the Alexandrian calendars, followed by the positions of the sun, the planets and the ascending lunar node. There are several inconsistencies in this data, but the astronomical positions indicate that the horoscope was cast for one of the last days of July 762. It may seem conspicuous that al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) does not mention the horoscope in his relatively long chapter on the foundation of al-Manṣūr's City, but he never reports horoscopes in his historical work.

It is al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048), who, some hundred and forty years later, left another account on the horoscope of al-Manṣūr's City in his *Chronology*. The planetary positions are not mentioned in the text but are written within a square horoscope diagram, the standard form for the display

of horoscopes. Al-Bīrūnī mentions the positions of the moon and of Mars, which were lacking in Ibn al-Faqīh's account. Besides sun, moon and planets, the horoscope contains also the head and tail of the dragon, which are the ascending and descending lunar nodes. All these data lead to the precise date of 30 July 762 for the foundation, although al-Bīrūnī arranged the account together with the events of 23 July. According to al-Bīrūnī's data, the sun is in Leo and Jupiter in Sagittarius at the ascendent. This means that, in Ibn Faqīh's first account, sun and Jupiter must have been confused. In addition, values for the solar, lunar and planetary positions in al-Bīrūnī's data are on average 2° to 3° smaller than the respective values according to modern calculation. This agrees with other horoscopes of the same epoch, and indicates the use of older astronomical tables without correction of the precession of the equinox. Since the precession of the equinox leads to a shift of 1° in about 72 years, the astronomical tables that were used in al-Bīrūnī's source must have been adjusted to a date between 540 and 629. Regarding other horoscopes of the same epoch, it has been assumed that they were based on the astronomical tables prepared during the reign of Khusraw I. Anushirwan (r. 531–579). The same tables might have been used for the horoscope of al-Manṣūr's City, but the usage of Indian tables cannot be ruled out as well. In his work, al-Bīrūnī writes that Nawbakht chose the best date and time for the horoscope of al-Manṣūr's City. To choose the best time for any important undertaking was a branch of astrology called *ikhtiyārāt* ("choices"), which astrologers in the Muslims' realm inherited from Indian astrology. Indeed, the horoscope of al-Manṣūr's Palatial City shows features of an intentional choice, since Jupiter, the "great Fortune", is in the ascendent, and is placed in the zodiacal sign of Sagittarius, which is Jupiter's domicile, where he, Jupiter, can unfold his full power. This is supported by the position of the sun that is in the sun's domicile, the sign of Leo. Furthermore, sun and Jupiter are in the most harmonious aspect (Trigon = 120°).

The historicity of the accounts on the horoscope of Baghdad is doubtful. Mashā'allāh invented a great number of historical horoscopes, such as for the creation of the world (5783 BCE) and for the Deluge (3381 BCE), but he also created horoscopes for events of his own life-time. One

of the latest of them is the succession of Hārūn al-Rashīd (20 March 786). Mashāʿallāh could have invented the date for the Baghdad horoscope in retrospect, by looking for a horoscope with a favorable constellation in the year in which historians recorded Baghdad’s foundation. But it is not at all improbable that al-Manṣūr indeed consulted astrologers for the time of Baghdad’s foundation. Al-Bīrūnī quotes a passage of an astronomical work, which he says that it was translated from Sanskrit into Arabic at the beginning of the ʿAbbāsīd dynasty.

In any case, the horoscope of Baghdad is an early witness for the practice of astronomy and astrology at the dawn of the ʿAbbāsīd empire after a longer period with no activities in those disciplines in the territory of the Islamic world.

Bibliography

For the respective horoscopes, see

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II Capricornus III Aquarius Head 25'	I Sagittarius Jupiter	XII Scorpio XI Libra Moon 19° 10'
IV Pisces	[30 July 782 CE]	X Virgo
V Aries Saturn 27° 40' retrograde VI Taurus	Mars 2° 50' Venus 28° 0'	IX Leo Juli 25° Mercury 25° 7' Sun 8° 10' VIII Cancer

