

Michael Scot's rebus figure of "Juppiter" as prototype for the tarot pack's "Magus"/"Bateleur"

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Abstract

To aid recall of written texts, monastic scholars of the ninth to fourteenth centuries developed a type of marginal image which represented the words of that accompanying text quite literally. The present article considers one such figure, composed in the 12th century but clearly related to the 'Magus'/'Bateleur' of the later 78-card packs.

IN A TREATISE composed by the astronomer Michael Scot for the Emperor Frederick II, King of Sicily, in the twelfth century, we find a marginal figure labelled 'Juppiter' which is evidently the precursor for that 'Bateleur'/'Magus' included in the major arcana of our tarot pack.¹ Like all the early 'major arcana' figures, this marginal 'Juppiter' represents an astronomical object, its depiction referring to (i) the objective, scientific astronomical information about the constellation, gained from works composed in the eastern sphere and (ii) something of the figure's traditional moral or astrological virtue in the religious moralia of eastern and western Christianity.

This complex of information is presented elegantly and very literally - partly by making the figure's overall form accord with the astronomical facts, and partly by having the picture's finer details reflect specific items about the star's moral or actual attributes. Such images rely on an ancient tradition of stellar moralia and were constructed according to a formal method developed over the preceding centuries in the monastic scriptoria of Europe. Such figures served to aid a reader in memorising and/or recalling a given text, while demonstrating how that text conformed to the 'immortal scroll' of heaven as the pattern of divine intent for human history.²

Each picture of this type was 'a picture worth a thousand words' and a picture representing literally as many of the text's words as possible. The genre led to a specialised sense for the Latin term 'rebus'. Though rebus meant simply 'picture', it gradually came to mean pictures such as this, where words and phrases are realised exactly in a picture's form and details. A rebus of the older, monastic sort contained no written letters, nothing extraneous, nothing meaningless and certainly nothing purely ornamental. It conformed to the

¹ The figure is to be seen illustrated in Tester, Jim, *A History of Western Astrology*, Woodbridge. Boydell, 1987, pp.146. [Plate III]. (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 266 f.197v)

² This understanding was derived from Biblical text and commentaries. But see e.g. Isaiah 34:4 and Revelations (Apocalypse) 6:14.

appearance of the constellation in the heavens, but without any overt imitation of classical astronomical form. We will see the method at work in Scot's picture, and understand how easily such figures were constructed and read. The style gained a new impetus about this time due to the closer contact between the eastern and western spheres, and reached an extraordinary level of perfection among the Cistercian and Dominican manuscripts and architecture of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

We are fortunate that Scot was evidently so well-trained in the method. He was of course a monk as well as a scholar and his "Juppiter" is a fine example of the astronomical rebus. "Juppiter" is so skilfully made that we can still read the image and discover its astronomical identity. According to the older conventions, this 'Juppiter' (as a rebus) must echo the outline of the appropriate constellation. Its superficial dress must show consonance with that constellation's established moral character and then, in the picture's finer details, we should see an extension of that information by allusion to other authoritative text/s. No element in the picture may be extraneous, none may be invented and all must have some established text as its validation.

First derived from, and always closely connected to, the oratory and learning of eastern Christianity, the rebus-figure first entered western monastic works as early as the seventh century. At first those 'speaking' images were verbal images, a speaker ordering his thoughts and message to the sequence of star-characters.

After about the end of the tenth century, those 'figures of speech' begin to be realised in visual form in western monastic art, set in a manuscript's margins or as a frontispiece. Again, the aim to aid one in following the progression of written words, by presenting a parallel progression of moralised star-figures.

Scot was in an exceptionally good position to refresh his knowledge of the basic method. Resident in Norman Sicily under Frederick, he had contact with the eastern Christian communities present there. Monuments remaining in Sicily show evidence of Coptic Egyptian, Persian Nestorian and Antiochian (Syrian/Greek) Christian communities there, as well of Muslims from North Africa, Arabia and all Islam.

Scot learned some Arabic, depicting and using the Arabic star-terms destined to become standard for western astronomical science for the following seven centuries. In Scot's day, Arabic was the single common language of Islam, spoken and written by all the communities within the region of Islamic government, and one should be very wary of making any automatic equation between 'Arabic-speaker' and 'Muslim'. Scot also had the European Christian habit of translating his source-texts in full, including proper names of non-Christian and pre-Christian deities, which were rendered by the nearest Latin/Roman equivalent. That habit was in place by the Carolingian period and would persist into the Renaissance. Scot's "Juppiter" therefore is not to be

assumed a classical Roman figure, and is most likely (as we will see) based on a stellar deity anciently revered in Crete or Babylonia.³

We must now 'read' the Juppiter to determine its astronomical identity. We consider (i) scientific astronomy and (ii) astronomical moralia. To help the reader place the figure, Scot flanked his 'Juppiter' with a pair of dot-forms, derived from a system of notation usually called 'geomantic'. Thanks to Agrippa, the geomantic figures are relatively well-known in Europe. 16 in all, they are most often considered used for divination in the dust. However, among the peoples of Islam in Scot's time, the same 16 dot-figures served as a kind of astronomical shorthand. Each represented certain among the 28 asterisms of the eastern lunar mansions, so that calculations with the 16 notae could be terrestrial or celestial in reference. The Arabic term for a lunar mansion is *manazil* [pl: *manzil*]. The full sequence of 28 had enormous importance in the near east, part of the religious and agricultural calendars, of astrology, medicine and even navigation.

To identify the astronomical equivalents of these two 'geomantic figures' however is not altogether easy. There was no general agreement about the correlations, or even a universal style in writing the dot-figures. Scot used a convention prevalent in North Africa and one evidently common among instrument makers of Mosul. Scot's system of notation and correspondence appears on a divinatory device made by a Mosuli in the following century⁴ and so, most fortunately, by reference to that device, we can 'read' Scot's notae in astronomical terms.

To "Juppiter's" right Scot has the figure which Arabic-speaking geomancers call *al hiyan*: the jawbone (also called *al-lahyan* the laughing). In Europe's Latin works, it is called "Joy." *Al hiyan* is equated with α Tauri, the first star of Taurus, on the divinatory device. (In astronomy the star's Arabic name is *al-Dabaran*: The Follower. α Tauri/Aldabaran constitutes a lunar mansion of its own).

To the other side, Scot set the dot-figure known as *qabd dakhil* "increasing grip/the act of seizing possession" - or in Latin sources⁵ *Aquisito*, Gain. The

³ It was well known that the 'gods of the nations' had been astronomical figures. Pierre d'Ailly (1350-1420 ad., another monk-scholar) had an especial interest in the subject and his *Compendium Geographie* moves effortlessly between the quasi-historical 'gods' and their stellar equivalents. The idea was that a grateful people elevated their most notable rulers to the heavens as 'gods' after death. Early Christian thought saw the ascension of saints in much the same way.

⁴ Savage-Smith, Emilie and Smith, Marion, *Islamic geomancy and a Thirteenth-Century Divinatory Device*, Malibu: Undeena Publications, 1980. The west as a rule adopted the style of notation used in North Africa, Arabia and Persia, though with various systems for correlation to the *manzil*. But other methods for geomantic notation were known, and are used (for example) on the lunar-mansions chart of the *Atlas Català*.

⁵ such as Cornelius Agrippa's works.

divinatory device tells us this represents the manazil known as Al Dhir - 'The Ell measure' - formed of the stars γ , μ , ν , ξ [?] Geminorum, rising.

What one notices immediately, when comparing Scot's image with the sky, is that the 'facing' for Juppiter is reversed. That is to say, that instead of the left-right exchange one expects in facing another figure, we ourselves are assumed to be in the position of this 'Juppiter' - with his left our left, and his right our right. Such reversal is not uncommon in older astronomical works and tells us the designer began from the form of a celestial globe. The same reversal is characteristic of some of our earliest cards, too.

We may even know which globe Scot used. About the time he lived in Sicily, a great celestial globe was made for the North African astronomer-geographer known as al 'Idrisi.⁶ Born in North Africa, 'Idrisi was educated in Persia at the Beit al Hikmah, travelled widely by land and sea and then took up residence in the Norman court of Sicily for about fifteen years. Arriving there in the days of Roger II, 'Idrisi remained for some time as one of its leading lights under Roger's successor, Frederick II - for whom Scot's astronomical texts were made. But 'Idrisi was a Muslim and by then Christians from Byzantium, Greece and Europe were asserting pre-eminence over the Sicilian court. Many of the older, Arabic-speaking scholars were gradually displaced, and 'Idrisi returned home to North Africa. There his textbook of universal geography, his planispheric world-map and his silver celestial globe became the basis for a universal educational system once popular throughout North Africa. His text-book was formally entitled 'Amusement for he who would travel around the world' though when it became known in Europe it was termed 'The Book of Roger'. It included a description of the world in the form of a kind of patchwork map.⁷

However, to return to Scot's image. Since the two lunar mansions are not widely separated in the sky, we may identify the principal figure by narrowing our field of vision to the space between them, extending the possible area northward as far as the northern and southward as far as the southern pole-stars. By the conventions of monastic rebus figures, our "Juppiter's" body must lie in that narrow space between al Dhir and al-Dabaran and in the regions closely adjacent we must find all the main elements of Scot's picture... nothing extraneous, without meaning or merely ornamental.

Beginning again with the line of the moon, we see that only one manazil occurs between al-Dhir and al-Dabaran. It is called al-Hakah [The White

⁶ 'Idrisi means Hermes. The clan 'Idrisi held the Caliphate in North-west Africa.

⁷ Kimble, *Geography in the Middle Ages*, London: Methuen, 1958. "Taking the seven main Ptolemaic climata in order, [Idrisi] divides each of them into ten longitudinal sections, a fashion started earlier by Islamic astronomers. These seventy sections he describes in detail, illustrating each description with a map. When put together these [70] maps constitute a rectangular world map after the Ptolemaic pattern." p.57

Spot] and is formed by the central star in Orion's head (λ Orionis).

Some strands of Cabbalism hold that the 'Magus'/'Bateleur' card represented Orion⁸. The identification could make sense: older astronomical texts call Orion the 'head' or leader of the constellations. Being greatest of the visible constellations Europe, it would also offer a reasonable figure to be identified with Roman Jupiter, head and leader of the Roman pantheon.

However, it cannot be so. When the image is compared with other early versions on card of the 'Bateleur,' or compared with Orion's form in other astronomical texts or (even more importantly) when one takes into account the additional details which Scot considered essential, it is clear some other astronomical figure must be our seminal 'Juppiter'/'Bateleur'.

By the formal criteria, correspondence with the form of the heavens must be recognisable, if not absolutely exact in the modern astronomical sense. There must be, at least, near our 'Juppiter' in the sky, some astronomical equivalent for the quadrilateral table made so prominent in our picture. The 'Juppiter' also holds aloft a rosette which must not only appear in the right place in the heavens, but must represent specifically the asterism known as the Pleiades. The rosette of 7 spots, as sign for the Pleiades, is attested from Babylonian times. It occurs in Crete on the Phaistos disk as early as the third millennium b.c. And as a verbal image it also occurs in the Bible (Job 38:31) forming (as it continues to do) a frequent reference in eastern poetry and literature.⁹

So our 'Juppiter' is not just somewhere between al-Dhir and al-Dabaran. It is to one side of the Pleiades, and adjacent to a large and noticeable quadrilateral 'table'. Once does not need to look far; it is to be found just a little higher than Orion's head. The only constellation in the right place and surrounded by the right asterisms, and adjacent to a quadrilateral 'table' is Auriga.

That constellation Arabic-speaking Bedu of North Africa called 'The Dandy': Al 'Aiyug, or in full "Al 'Aiyug al Thurayya," the Dandy of/with the Pleiades." The Bedu had (and have) a very ancient body of stellar lore and proverb, from which the scholars of Islam and Norman Sicily drew a major part of their comparative astronomy.¹⁰ Al-Dhir and al-Dabaran are to either side of Auriga. The 'table' is also identifiable. There, below and off to one side of Auriga, it is formed from the three lunar mansions which together compose the geomantic figure known as 'ijtima "the act of collecting and arranging

⁸ others opt for Bootes.

⁹ Hinkley Allen, *Star-Names their Lore and Meaning*, Dover Press reprint. p. 394.

¹⁰ Bailey, Clinton, "Bedouin star lore in Sinai and the Negev" BSOAS XXXVII(1974) p.580. See also Jurdak, *Astronomical Dictionary*. Most other sources call this mansion Al 'Aiyuk - The Embracer. Such was the standard among Arabic-speaking Muslims, and it is notable that Scot's imagery does not reflect this norm, but the usage in the tribes most noted (even today) or their old astronomical traditions.

objects".¹¹ The geomantic figure is made thus: $\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta, \epsilon$, and the three mansions concerned are: Al-dhira' - formed of α, β Geminorum Al-nathra - formed of $\lambda, \delta, \epsilon$ Canceri Al-tarf - formed of ξ Canceri and λ Leonis. To see it as the three as forming a three dimensional 'table' one draws the board from α, β Geminorum, γ Canceri, ξ and λ Leonis, which leaves the table-leg extending from γ Canceri through to ϵ Canceri.

Mnemonic style in medieval monastic art.

As we have seen so far, the monastic rebus was designed to assist a scholar in absorbing and later recalling some given written text. It embodies the content of that text, while offering prompts to related matter from other standard source-works. So, now, having asserted that Scot's image is intended for Auriga, we must see how each part of the picture is linked to that identity. We establish our proof as in mathematics, by reckoning in reverse.

'Juppiter/Bateleur' is depicted, on the one hand, as well-fed and joyous - so we see the notation to one hand for 'al-lahyan'/Joy. His other hand grasps tightly his glove and purse, and to his other side is the notation-figure: 'tightly gripping' [qabd dakhil].¹² Scot has represented him - not as father of the gods - but with a plump and slightly precious appearance, with gloves, purse and rosette. We consider the Arabic astronomical term among the Bedu: 'Aiug - the "Dandy" and then - as our eyes move to the rosette - the figure's name in full: 'Aiug al Thurayya "The Dandy of/with the Pleiades"'.

Scot's figure is a rebus indeed, clear and well-constructed, a speaking picture intended to be read and identified.

So from the plain, astronomical matter to the religious and moral implications. The medieval scholar would be expected to recognise allusion to specific well-known written texts. Which was Scot thinking of?

One would have to investigate a wide range of texts written in (or translated from) the classical and eastern languages to exhaust the possibilities here, but there is one relevant passage which springs to mind immediately. It occurs in a late classical work, the *Astronomica*, and concerns the virtue conferred on those born under the chief star of Auriga. The *Astronomica* is mentioned by Gebert d'Aurillac in the tenth century and was later issued as a printed book by Regiomontanus, bishop of Nurenburg, who had close ties with the Italian neo-platonic circle around Bessarion. Perhaps it was known to the Norman kings too, for Scot's figure beautifully conveys the gist of the crucial passage:

¹¹ Savage-Smith, op.cit., p.33. The stars comprising manzil from Tibbetts G.R., *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the coming of the Portuguese*, being a translation of the *Kitab al-Fawaid fi usul al-bahr wal-qawaid* of Ahmad b. Majid al-Najdi, London: Luzac 1971. The mariners' traditions are better relied on since these stars were used in navigation every day, where land-based astrologers often knew only the names of the lunar mansions, and those not always accurately.

¹² reproduced in Tester, op.cit., p.46

"... sound nourishment, anxious minds and trembling hearts which start at every noise and are apt to flutter at the slightest cause." [Astronomica 5:135-6]. Our Dandy is plainly a person of exquisite sensibility.

As to the table and its contents

The table bears a cup, knife and flower. The objects may represent a memory-aid for the stars and constellations about Auriga - the cup was another conventional image for the Pleiades, for example, and in that form was made a geomantic figure called Fortuna major. The arrangement may be meant to recall only the three mansions composing that table, and their geomantic figure 'ijtima. But equally (and at the same time), they may have symbolised the three main social groupings, in recognition of the fact that the chief star in Auriga (Capella) was anciently one of the Royal four of Babylonian astrology. For the Babylonians, that star was assigned to Marduk, head of the Babylonian pantheon, whose role was to determine precisely a person's career, social status and destiny. 'Judgement/Measurement to a hair' nicely describes Auriga's character.

Marduk was among the ancient gods known to scholars in Christian Europe. As early as Charlemagne's day the scholar monk, Rhaban Maur, had compiled a descriptive list of the *diis gentium* (foreign gods), in which he describes the form and accoutrements of Babylonian and other eastern deities. His book was supplemented by others of the later medieval and renaissance periods, but remained a standard work of reference for artists well into the seventeenth century.¹³

But it must also be said that these objects on the table may be little more than a formal figure for an ordinary meal. In Scot's time, the knife was a diner's only implement, with bread trenchers used as individual plates. The one clearly evocative note is the flower placed as a trencher. The present writer considers this an allusion to the "bee-bread", ambrosia, on which Olympian gods were said to have fed. For a Christian of Scot's time it offered a natural equivalent to the bread of the Mass, as food of immortality.

In regard to Christian symbolism Scot might have meant to be seen here an allusion (by homophony) to Ambrose, bishop of Liguria, noted orator and friend of Augustine of North Africa. As we hope to describe further in a later article, the use of rebuses on cards included learned verbal games to improve one's skill in the arts of word; Liguria was to become a major early centre of card-manufacture, and Augustine was noted (among his many other

¹³ For all its heavy over-emphasis on the supposed originality of classical Roman and Greek forms, the standard text on this subject remains Seznec, Jean, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: the mythological tradition and its place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, Princeton University Press (various editions). In regard to the fascination with ancient non-classical deities in the Renaissance, see esp. Bk II Pt.3 'The Influence of the Manuals'.

accomplishments) for his phenomenal memory. He penned what is perhaps the most lucid of all early statements on mnemonic method, beginning: I come to the fields [campos] and spacious palaces of memory [lata praetoria memoriae] where are the treasures [thesauri] of innumerable images. "Campos stellae" - fields of stars - were how the Latins described our constellations, while 'spacious palaces' offers a very fair rendering of what is implied by the Arab manzil.

The structure and imagery of the 78-card pack originally (and as we have in Scot's marginal figure) united reference to the classical constellations with reference to the Eastern manzil. Set as discrete images on card, rebus figures such as this by Scot assisted memory of quite complex matters, astronomical, geographical, medical and philosophical. They represent in condensed form the fruits of hard-won learning, offered food for thought and reflections on religious wisdom, promising the scholar not only an 'immortal' memory among his fellows and an aid to fluent rhetoric, but an immortal place in heaven by the reflection on the divinely ordered world about him.

Religious wisdom and the figure of Scot's "Juppiter"

Auriga's traditional "moral character" is that of a reckoner. Classical Greece and Rome expressed these qualities of exquisite precision and nice judgement by envisaging Auriga as a charioteer. In most classical depictions of the constellation, we find this 'Charioteer' clutching a goat to his breast. It is not simply because Auriga's chief star is 'Capella': the goat. Rather the star was called 'the goat' as an additional expression of Auriga's exquisite precision.

For the Egyptians of the ancient world, the same idea was manifested by in the image of the goat's pelt, the aegis which, as Herodotus noted, was understood to be the root from which the word Egypt had come. Whether or not our modern etymologies would concur, what was believed to be true informed the development of learning and understanding for millennia. The classical 'Charioteer' holds the aegis to his heart as indication (not only his fluttering heart and high levels of adrenaline) but in token of the closeness in which Egyptians held their neighbour Crete long before the Greek or Roman ascendancy. Auriga had been the ancient national star for Crete, and was identified with its god and patron. This matter was understood by medieval monastic scholars and is referred to in medieval geographies.

Aegis signified divine protection, and in particular the particular protection evidenced by the Nile's covering of the land during the annual inundation. As Herodotus says 'Aegis/Egypt is the gift of the Nile' - and without that yearly flood Egypt would have turned to desert, like the land to either side. As the Nile rose, it progressively covered the face of Egypt with a veil of waters, restoring and re-assuring its fertility. And upon that fluid veil, Egypt's constant north wind formed a regular pattern of ripples - like the curls and locks of the goat-skin. In religion, the wearing of the goat-skin came to

signify a longing for forgiveness and the face-veil became a shield of divine honour in the near east. The priests of ancient Greece too bore the aegis in token of truce and religious honour. All in all, Agyptus/aegis signified the promise of life and right judgement, 'measurement to a hair'.

The notion had its technical side as well as its religious. After the Nile receded each year from 'Aegyptus', Egyptian geometers had to recalculate exactly the allotments of land proper for each land-holder. It was important work. Then, as now, minor errors in boundary lines might lead to bloodshed between neighbours. Within the fields of Egypt, where agriculture was life, re-establishing the 'divisions of the aegis/Aegyptus' was a matter of very nice reckoning indeed. Hence we have the link between the character of the old Auriga with its aegis held to the heart, the moral qualities which Scot conveyed in his figure and the 'nervous exactness' in reckoning expressed by the text of the *Astronomica* and which is the predominant and constant quality of this constellation.

In other cards, it is the figure as Reckoner which is emphasised but with time the fine precision of the calculator became the 'calculating' precision of the charlatan.

Though to us it may seem extraordinary to us that a Christian monastic scholar in Sicily of the 12th century should have any knowledge of the ancient stars and gods, an extraordinary amount of such information did survive the centuries up until the demise of monastic scholarship of the older sort. The forms and characters of the Egyptian and Babylonian gods, as well as their astronomical identities, were recorded in western Christian Europe as early as the ninth century, as noted above, and from Scot's time the subject would (for a while) become of renewed interest to the educated of the west.

Scot's inscription 'Juppiter' reminds him, and us, of connection between Auriga and the chief of the Babylonian gods, Marduk and his messenger-planet.¹⁴

Conclusion

Altogether, we Scot's prototype for our 'Bateleur' presents an image that encapsulates the accompanying astronomical text while, at the same time, evoking recall of broader allusions in religious and secular sources. We have

¹⁴ Gettings, F., *Dictionary of Astrology*: 'Marduk' states that this was 'one of the Chaldean names for the planet Jupiter'. Still more interesting is the note in the IDB to the effect that Marduk was considered the champion of the gods over the chaotic waters. That reputation accords well with the Cretans' ancient character as mariners and reckoners. In Syria, the same figure [Marduk] was identified with Baal. See IDB (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*), Nashville:Abingdon Vol.3 'Marduk'. For a fuller synthesis of original sources, explaining how Marduk was considered the creator of humankind see Sykes, Egerton, *Everyman's Dictionary of Non-Classical Mythology*, London: Dent (various editions).

only touched on that wider range of allusion here, because our main aim has been to identify the astronomical figure by a reading of the marginal figure.

Each of the 22 figures later incorporated into the European card-pack as the so-called major arcana was similarly composed from a synthesis of scientific and moralised astronomy. We may justify the use of the term arcana by an allusion made by Scot himself. He wrote that *"the more one contemplates the arcana of God and the arcana of the human heart, the more mysterious they seem."*