



1 Ptolemy's *Liber Quadripartiti*, published in Venice in 1484 (left)

2 Johannes Engel's *Astrolabium Planum*, 1488 (right)



3, 4, 5 Leopoldo d'Austria's *Compilatio [...] de Astrorum Scientia* (Augsburg, 1489)



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6 and 7
Constellations from
Hyginus' *Poeticon
Astronomicum*,
Venice (Ratdolt,
1485)



Chiara Nicolini examines an Italian collection of astrology books and charts the development of astrological illustrations

Signs of the time



I have recently been cataloguing the astrology books in the collection of an Italian lawyer who is currently writing a bibliography of astrological texts published between the 15th and the end of the 19th century. I found the early representations of zodiac signs, planets and constellations, the portraits of astrologers and ill-starred men, the horoscopes of historical personages (including Jesus Christ) and the illustrations of gloomy prophecies fascinating. Of course the field is vast, but there were particular images in this collection that I felt stood out and are

too rarely seen by non-expert readers.

One key area familiar to most people today is the zodiac. The symbols we still see in magazines and newspapers today were first developed when our ancestors discovered that the sun, the moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn progress along a band of particular constellations. The Greek word "zodiac" means "circle of animals". The sun passes through each constellation of the zodiac at a particular time of the year. In the northern hemisphere, it transits in Aries from 21 March to 20 April, in

Taurus from 21 April to 21 May, and so on. That is why the sign of people born, for instance, at the end of March is Aries, and why the astrological characteristics of Aries seem to reflect those of the natural changes occurring on the earth when the Sun transits in this constellation.

Many astrological works, particularly those issued in the 15th and 16th centuries, contain square woodcut diagrams (representing horoscopes). These may be simple graphics, but they are impossible to interpret without astrological knowledge. An early example illustrating the zodiac and its 12 houses (fig 1) comes from a fundamental astrology text, Ptolemy's *Liber Quadripartiti*, published in Venice in 1484 by Erhard Ratdolt, an illustrious printer from Augsburg who issued several astronomy and astrology works.

Ten years later, the Venetian Emericus de Spira reissued Johannes Engel's (or Angelus) *Astrolabium Planum* (Ratdolt, Augsburg, 1488), in which the astrological meaning of the position of the ascendant in each of the 360 degrees of the zodiac is graphically represented by 360 woodcut diagrams containing amusing symbolic figures (fig 2). The book also includes representations of the seven planets and of the 12 zodiac signs. The planets are portrayed as human figures in 15th-century clothes riding chariots drawn by the pair of animals associated with them (or by two virgins in the case of the moon). The wheels (or single wheel for the sun and moon)



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Pietro Alliacco's
*Concordantia
Astronomiae
cum Theologia*,
Venice, Ratdolt,
1490



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Johannes
Indagine's
*Introductiones
Apotelesmaticae
Elegantes in
Chiromantiam,
Physiognomiam,
Astrologiam*
(Strasbourg,
Joannis Scotti,
1522), with
illustrations by
Hans Baldung
Grien (c1484-1545)

of the chariots are medallions enclosing silhouettes of the zodiac signs governed by each planet. The images correspond to our contemporary iconography.

The woodcuts of the planets and zodiac signs in the *Poeticon Astronomicum* (Venice, Ratdolt, 1485) by the 1st-century BC author Caius Julius Hyginus are similar to those illustrating Engel's *Astrolabium*, but larger and more detailed. Their blocks, engraved by Geronimo de Sanctis from drawings by Johannes Lucilius Santritter, were also used by Ratdolt to illustrate other books. Some of these were hand coloured, for example in the beautiful copy of Leopoldo d'Austria's *Compilatio [...] de Astrorum Scientia* (Augsburg, 1489) that belongs to this collection (fig 3). The contemporary hand-colouring shows, for instance, the radiant splendour of the sun (fig 4), a young man with a halo of rays, holding a sceptre and riding a one-wheeled flaming chariot drawn by three vigorous horses.

This way of representing the astrological planets clearly derives from ancient and classical mythology. The vision of the sun as the god of light and as the symbol of masculine and active principles merged into the archetype of Apollo, who was god

of the arts and divination as well as having characteristics from the astrological symbolism of the sun. Similarly, the moon, first shown as the goddess of night and wife of the sun, was later venerated by the Romans as Luna, Diana and Hecate (rulers, respectively, of the sky, earth and underworld). It then began to symbolise female and passive principles, and was associated with instinct, madness, magic and dreams. In the *Compilatio* she is a young woman with a bow and arrow who rides a dog-shaped chariot drawn by two virgins, an illustration obviously deriving from the image of Artemis/Diana, goddess of hunters. On her head rests a moon sickle (fig 5).

Before the discovery of Uranus (in 1781), Neptune (1846) and Pluto (1930), Saturn was believed to be the farthest planet from the sun and, therefore, the slowest. Astrologers associated it with old age and death, meanings also attributed to the Greek god Cronos, who castrated his father with a scythe. The Romans merged Cronos with Saturn, the god of agriculture, whose attribute was also a scythe. That is why Leopoldo d'Austria's Saturn is represented as a bearded old man holding a scythe. Like his daughter Demeter/Ceres, he rides a chariot drawn by two dragons, one of which bites its own tail like the mythical snake Ouroboros, symbol of the endless cycle of birth and death. Zeus/Jupiter, the largest of the solar planets, the father of the gods, and the most positive planet in astrology, is seen as a bearded old man as well, receiving offers from a kneeling worshipper. His typical attributes are a thunderbolt and an eagle, which flew towards him before his battle with the Titans.

Mars and Mercury are both portrayed as young men. Mars, the Roman god of war, is appropriately shown as a soldier in armour holding a sword. Mercury, seen then as a tiny point of light moving rapidly close to the sun, became a symbol of the liveliness of childhood as well as the personification of sharp wit, communication and shrewdness. The classical messenger of the gods and protector of travellers, he wore a broad-brimmed hat with wings and winged sandals or boots. In both the *Astrolabium* and the *Compilatio* he holds a rod with two entwined snakes (a caduceus) and rides a chariot drawn by two cockerels.

Lastly, Venus, the most brilliant planet and the classical archetype of beauty, who personifies passion, pleasure and love, is shown on a chariot drawn by two doves (symbol of love and constancy), with her son Eros standing in front of her. Like Mercury, she wears a winged hat because her planet progresses quickly. In addition to the representations of the planets, Hyginus' *Poeticon Astronomicum* also contains large and striking, although rather basic, woodcuts of the constellations with the figures drawn around the stars that compose them (figs 6 and 7).

Some books also included pictures of the astrologers themselves. Pietro Alliacco's *Concordantia Astronomiae cum Theologia* (Venice, Ratdolt, 1490), for example, contains a famous frontispiece portraying a theologian and an astronomer/astrologer discussing the compatibility of these disciplines (fig 8).

Many of the 16th-century figured astrological works held in the collection were printed in Germany. One of the earliest and most important is Johannes Indagine's *Introductiones Apotelesmaticae Elegantes in Chiromantiam, Physiognomiam, Astrolo-*



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Johann Rothmann's *Chiromantiae Teorica Pratica Concordantia Genethialica*, Erfurt, Pistorius, 1595



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11
Prognosticatio by Johannes Lichtenberger (1526) and

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Friedrich Nausea's *Liber Mirabilium Septem* (1532), both printed in Cologne by Peter Quentell

giam (Strasbourg, Joannis Scotti, 1522), with illustrations by Hans Baldung Grien (c1484-1545) and Hans Wechtlin (1480/85-after 1526). Both artists trained in Albrecht Dürer's workshop and lived in Strasbourg, where woodcut artistry had reached its highest expression with Martin Schongauer. Grien, a distinguished Renaissance painter, was a prolific artist whose work includes around 90 paintings and many drawings. For the *Introductiones Apotelesmaticae* ("introduction to the art of making predictions") he drew Indagine's portrait on the frontispiece and in his coat of arms on the last page. The other numerous illustrations are of dubious attribution. Those portraying the seven planets recall the images in the Hyginus, but their style shows the maturity achieved in woodcutting after Dürer. Fine shading gives the figures volume, the faces are more expressive, the animals more animated, and the clothes and details are more realistic. This can be seen in the energy emanating from Mars's chariot (drawn by two wolves, another animal sacred to the god of war), and by the realistic cockerels drawing Mercury's chariot.

Saturn appears in two woodcuts (possibly by different artists). In the first picture, which is closer to that in Hyginus, the dragons have scales and blood spurts from the bitten tail of one of them, while the second, more faithful to mythology, portrays him eating his son and castrating a young Uranus with a sickle (fig 9).

The illustrations are probably partly why Indagine's work was extremely popular. Later books, such as Guido Bonato's *De Astronomia Tractatus X* (Basle, J Kundig, 1550, third edition) and Hyginus' *Fabularum Liber* (Basle, Mycillus e Officina Hervagiana, 1570, third edition) have fewer illustrations and the pictures are smaller and less detailed, although finely executed. *Introductiones Apotelesmaticae Elegantes in Chiromantiam, Physiognomiam, Astrologiam* also includes long illustrated chapters dealing with chiromancy and physiognomy, two disciplines closely associated with astrology. Images of the connection between chiromancy and astrology are limited to the representation of the astrological glyphs on the hand and to the combination of hands and horoscopes, as in Johann Rothmann's *Chiromantiae Teorica Pratica Concordantia Genethialica* (fig 10) (Erfurt, Pistorius,



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Frontispiece to Mauro Fiorentino's *Sphera Volgare Nuovamente Tradotta* (Florence, Bartolomeo Zanetti, 1537)

1595). The connection between astrology and physiognomy, continued to develop.

Two other early 16th-century German books are worth mentioning: the *Prognosticatio* by Johannes Lichtenberger, and Friedrich Nausea's *Liber Mirabilium Septem*, both printed in Cologne by Peter Quentell in, respectively, 1526 and 1532. Unlike the treatises mentioned above, which analyse the nature of planets and zodiac signs, these deal with prophecies based on the observation of natural phenomena, although in different ways. Lichtenberger, the personal astrologer of the emperor Frederic III, foretells a series of political and religious events illustrated with 38 simple, but effective, woodcuts (fig 11) that were probably inspired by the conjunction of Saturn with Jupiter in 1484 and by the solar eclipse of 1485. Bishop Nausea, a strong opponent of astrology, takes a more rational approach to evaluating miracles and supposedly harmful manifestations, such as the passage of the Halley comet in 1531 (fig 12). The 26 finely engraved woodcuts in *Liber Mirabilium* were by the Worms painter and woodcutter Anton Woensam (last decade of the 15th century-1541).

Until the 16th century, astrology was closely associated with astronomy, cosmography and similar sciences. Because of this, many early books treat these subjects together and are illustrated mainly with scientific diagrams. Mauro Fiorentino's *Sphera Volgare Nuovamente Tradotta* (Florence, Bartolomeo Zanetti, 1537), for example, is an important work that opens with a beautiful pictorial frontispiece depicting the author, two globes (one showing the newly discovered "America"), and a seascape with the sun, the moon and stars enclosed in a frame with musical and scientific instruments and with small images of the zodiac signs (fig 13). Some of these scientific manuals contain amazing movable dials (or "volvelles"), sometimes made with several paper wheels. In Giovanni Paolo Gallucci's *Theatrum Mundi* (Venice, G B Somasco, 1588) there are 69 volvelles, many for astrological calculations. The most impressive of these books is the *Astronomique Discours* (Lyon, Jean De Tournes, 1557) by Jacques Bassantin, a massive folio with 37 large volvelles, some of which are made of five wheels.

Moving on to the 17th century, *Colestis Physiognomia* (Naples, G B Sottile, 1603) by an extravagant Neapolitan called Giovanni Battista Della Porta, is an intriguing text on the seven planets and their corresponding human types. It contains 13 copper engravings portraying the planets not according to traditional iconography, but on the basis of the physiognomic features that each of them (and those born under them) should have. The idea that the people born under the influence of certain planets should share particular physiognomic traits is common. The collection includes a Belgian hagiography, the *Zodiacus Religiosus* (Antwerp, Johannes Franciscus Crabben, 1669) by Philippe van der Beken, which associates even saints' physical and psychological attributes with their sign of the zodiac.

Robert Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmii [...] Metaphysica, Physica Atque Technica Historia* (Frankfurt, De Bry & Galleus, 1617-18) is one of the most famous and handsome books ever published. Illustrated throughout with extraordinary copper engravings by Matthäus Merian (1593-1650), founder of a



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Robert Fludd's
Utriusque Cosmii
[...] *Metaphysica,*
Physica Atque
Technica Historia
(Frankfurt, De Bry
& Galleus, 1617-18)

15
Aegidius Strauch's
Astrognosia
(Wittenberg,
Jobi Wilhelm
Fincel, 1659)



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Frankfurt dynasty of engravers and publishers that remained operative until 1727, it deals with the origin of the universe, the music of the spheres, angels and demons, geometry, physics, music, painting, fortifications and weapons, mechanics, cosmography and other subjects. It is the classic all-encompassing Renaissance encyclopaedia of human knowledge. The chapter dedicated to astrology is not illustrated, but planets, signs and other constellations appear in a magnificent double-page engraving of the cosmos, which shows the hand of God controlling with a chain the World Mother of the Kabbalist tradition, and a poor monkey-man chained to the World Mother (fig 14).

Another fundamental encyclopaedic work is the *Opera Quotquot Reperiri Potuerunt Omnia* by the Venerable Bede (Colonia, Antonius Hieratus, 1612, fourth edition). This, however, apart from a majestic frontispiece by F Braun, engraved on copper by Peter Isselburg (c. 1568 or 1580-after 1630), contains only a few scientific diagrams. More fascinating from the graphic point of view is Jacques Gaffarel's *Curiositates*

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William Lilly's
Annus Tenebrosus or Dark Year or Astrological Judgements upon two Lunar Eclipses, and one admirable Eclips of the Sun, all visible in England, 1652 (London, Company of Stationers and Humfrey Blunden, 1652)



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A Manual of Astrology, by 'Raphael',
 London, C S Arnold, 1828



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Inauditae and its commentary by Gregoire Michael (Hamburg, Gothofredum Schulzen, 1678, ninth edition, and Amsterdam, Jansson Waesberg, 1676), illustrated with rough woodcuts of angels, sirens, goddesses of antiquity and monsters. Bound in one volume, they open with an attractive copper engraving of a group of astrologers and cabalists in a frame decorated by five emblems. Many astrology books, particularly those from the 17th and 18th centuries, have finely engraved title pages showing allegorical figures or an astrologer studying the night sky.

One particularly worth mentioning is the rare first edition of Aegidius Strauch's *Astrognesia* (Wittenberg, Jobi Wilhelm Fincel, 1659), a tiny oblong volume (7 x 11cm) illustrated with 33 splendid engravings of the constellations (fig 15).

In the 17th century, England became a battlefield for a number of astrologers who published almanacs, pamphlets attacking their "scurrilous" colleagues, large treatises, and books with political and natural

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The Gospel of the Stars, New York, Continental Publications Ltd, 1899

predictions, often catastrophic, based on eclipses and unlucky conjunctions of the planets. Among these, the most illustrious is William Lilly, court astrologer to Charles I and author of *Christian Astrology* (London, John Maccok, 1659). His *Annus Tenebrosus or Dark Year or Astrological Judgements upon two Lunar Eclipses, and one admirable Eclips of the Sun, all visible in England, 1652* (London, Company of Stationers and Humfrey Blunden, 1652) contains a series of 21 full-page woodcuts. He explains: "Had the curtesie of the present Times deserved it at my hands, thou hadst seene an Explanation of the sixteen Pages following, which in *Ænigmaticall Types, Formes, Figures, Shapes, doth perfectly represent the future condition of the English Nation and Commonwealth for many hundred of years to come.*" One of these woodcuts shows corpses being buried and another shows a town devastated by a fire (fig 16). Commentators have made much of the fact that plague broke out in London in 1655 before it was devastated by the great fire of 1666.

More than 100 years later, another English astrologer, Ebenezer Sibly, published a massive volume of 1,126 pages on all aspects of astrology: *A New and Complete Illustration of the Celestial Science of Astrology* (London, for the Proprietor and sold by W Nicoll, M Sibly and E Sibly, 1784-88). It is richly illustrated and includes pictures of the solar system, the planets, the horoscopes and portraits of historical figures (from Alexander the Great, Nero and Henry VIII, to the Earl of Essex, Elizabeth I, William Lilly, Erasmus and Luther), of eclipses and many other subjects. Among the most curious are those of the horoscope of Jesus Christ and of the American Revolution.

Lastly, there are four 19th-century books that must be mentioned. The French *Le Zodiaque Expliqué* (Paris, 1809) by C G Schwartz contains a beautiful fold-out plate of the constellations. The second, *A Manual of Astrology* by "Raphael" (Robert Cross Smith, London, C S Arnold, 1828), opens with an attractive stipple-engraved, hand-coloured frontispiece and title-page (fig 17), while the third, Ethelbert Bullinger's *The Witness of the Stars* (London, published by the author, 1893), contains white on blue plates of the constellations. The fourth is the American *The Gospel of the Stars* (New York, Continental Publications Ltd, 1899), which closes the century with an imaginative Art Nouveau cover which treats the subject in a new, modern way (fig 18).