

EIKASMOS

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Quaderni Bolognesi di Filologia Classica · Studi 32

# THRONOS

*Historical Grammar of Furniture  
in Mycenaean and Beyond*

edited by

**RACHELE PIERINI, ALBERTO BERNABÉ, MARCO ERCOLES**



PÀTRON EDITORE - BOLOGNA

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*Quaderni Bolognesi di Filologia Classica*

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RACHELE PIERINI - ALBERTO BERNABÉ - MARCO ERCOLES

**THRONOS**  
HISTORICAL GRAMMAR OF FURNITURE  
IN MYCENAEAN AND BEYOND

PÀTRON EDITORE - BOLOGNA

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Bologna, January 2021

The editors,

Rachele Pierini, Alberto Bernabé, Marco Ercoles

## Preface

*The longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward.*

Winston Churchill

The idea of this volume *THRONOS* arose when Rachele Pierini met Eugenio Perazza, founder and director of the design company MAGIS.

Inspired by a steel rod chair on the cover of a book, Perazza founded MAGIS from scratch in 1976 and named the company after Latin *magis* ‘plus’. In a few decades, MAGIS has become a flagship company of Italian design thanks to Perazza’s vision and quest for excellence. Innovation and talent-scouting have been signature elements of Perazza’s leadership style since MAGIS’ foundation: ‘plus’ is the MAGIS projects’ must have and “to be unique and universal”, Perazza’s motto.

Here lies the intersection between MAGIS and *THRONOS*: furniture is the universal, directions are the uniqueness. MAGIS looks forward, *THRONOS* looks back to the earliest written attestation of furniture from Europe: the Pylos Linear B tablets of the Ta series. Design and Mycenaean furnishing items are different realizations and interpretations of the same craft, whose similarities far exceed chronological differences, starting with common features in designers’ and classicists’ work.

Designers observe phenomena and convey the core part of their message into a new form through a different material. Classicists use these same mechanisms in working with words and texts by identifying the morphophonological structures of a language and analysing them from a diachronic perspective or translating them into another language. Designers and Classicists cross paths on prototypes.

Prototypes play a key role in creative processes and material culture by linking the conceptual inception to the earliest steps of its concrete realization. Moreover, prototypes have a twofold historical dimension since design prototypes are drafts that lead to the creation of new furnishing projects and, in fact, each item becomes the starting point for the next project, thus adding a diachronic perspective. Changes concern not only prototypes as tangible items but also their names, since what we call the objects varies as well, sometimes deviating significantly from the original definition. Mycenaean *to-no* and later Greek *thronos* indicate a ‘chair’ in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE, but the modern correspondent of *thronos* (*throne*, *trono*, *trône*, *Thron*) refers to a very specific kind of seat, namely the sovereign chair. By looking at words as evolving prototypes, Mycenaean *to-no* happens to be the prototype of thrones as well as that of *Chair\_One* – MAGIS.

This has been the starting point of *THRONOS* as a *Historical Grammar of Furniture*. The Pylos Ta tablets show us the earliest reconstructable stages, not only of Greek furniture terminology but also of Greek craftsmanship: prototypes,

the items and the nouns used to define them. The study of this material must take into account the vital connection between language and tangible objects, between nouns' and items' evolution. On this basis Pierini has designed *THRONOS. Historical Grammar of Furniture in Mycenaean and Beyond*, an idea that co-editors Bernabé and Ercoles have helped to convey into a collective volume.

This book is composed of two sections. The first part *In Mycenaean* examines what Mycenaean studies have investigated about the Pylos Ta tablets and moves forward towards new approaches and interpretations. It is divided in two subsections: (i) "Prototypes", which focuses on the Ta series as a whole as well as furnishing paraphernalia (*e-ka-ra* and *ti-ri-po*) and each furnishing prototype that the tablets mention (*to-pe-za*, *to-no*, *ta-ra-nu*); and (ii) "Materials", which proceeds from the general to the particular and covers materials used for Mycenaean furniture, from wood (main material of tables, chairs, stools, and footstool), to ivory (used as decorative material for the same items), as well as the enigmatic *a<sub>2</sub>-ro[ ]u-do-pi*.

The second part *and Beyond* looks at the evolution of Mycenaean prototypes throughout the centuries. It investigates roles and functions of furniture in historical times and the relationship between furniture and literary genres. This part is also divided in two subsections: (i) "Indoor", which focuses on furniture mentioned in multiple sources, from the iconographic evidence at the Palace of Nestor, to textual attestations in the Homeric poems, Greek lyric poetry, proverbial traditions, epigraphic sources of the Classical period, and Greek biblical translations; and (ii) "Outdoor", which examines the key role of furnishing items in the *mise-en-scène* of Greek comedies and explores the metaphoric use of furniture in the most open of spaces, that is, the sky as described in astrological texts of the Hellenistic period.

Although this volume underwent some delays, we are pleased that *THRONOS* has at last seen the light in 2021, which in Italy coincides with the *Anno Dantesco*, namely the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passing of the father of the Italian language, Dante Alighieri. This gives us the opportunity to add one more entry to our survey on furniture:

*Or tu chi se', che vuo' sedere a scranna,  
per giudicar di lungi mille miglia  
con la veduta corta d'una spanna?*

Dante, *Paradiso* XIX 79-81

Mindful of Dante's advice to avoid self-elections in prominent positions (i.e. by sitting on the sovereign chair *scranna*) to judge events that are far away in time with our limited view as human beings, editors, departments, design companies, and institutions have joined forces to gain a better knowledge about *THRONOS* and the *Historical Grammar of Furniture*.

Bologna, January 2021

Rachele Pierini, Alberto Bernabé, Marco Ercoles



## **The celestial footstool: the metaphor of the throne and the stool in Classical astrology**

Fino a tutto il XVI secolo l'astrologo è soprattutto un filosofo che interpreta i moti del cielo e le leggi della natura, egli è astronomo e fisico, non di rado medico, e si considera discepolo di Tolomeo, di Galeno, di Aristotele; il suo pensiero è il pensiero di un classico.

(Bezza 1986)

Ever since Giuseppe Bezza coined the term “Classical astrology” in the early 80s, this perhaps improper, but certainly suggestive, definition has come into common use. It refers to the doctrinal corpus of technical literature that begins to appear in the field of Greek and Hellenistic culture from the early centuries preceding the Christian era, one that historians such as Holden (1996, 11-17) define more properly as “Western astrological horoscopy”. This is what would give rise to the rich astrological tradition of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age, developing and flourishing up to the middle of the seventeenth century including extraordinarily influential and significant writers such as Placidus Titi and William Lilly. The profound crisis of the eighteenth century that originated with the Enlightenment was to put an end to this tradition, marking a clean break in historical continuity with regards to the deteriorating forms and uncertain roots of so-called modern astrology.

Differing philosophical approaches and interpretive techniques fall within the definition of astrological horoscopy, but they in fact share a common denominator. The true art of Classical astronomical prediction is based on astronomical considerations, leaving myth in the hands of literary writers, mythographers and poets of the sky. Yet the distinction is not always so clear-cut. This sometimes leads to the coexistence of terminologies and concepts that appear to have originated in an attempt to mythically explain celestial phenomena, along with more rigorous interpretations based on astronomical reality and the scientific study of celestial motion.

### **1. Planets on the throne**

In an attempt to read the fortunes of kings and the powerful, as well as ordinary mortals, in the Ptolemaic sky, the Classical astrologer has often used the image of a throne and a stool, as a metaphor for elevation, exaltation, upward ascent, and success. Ptolemy (*Tetr.* I 23,2) names these “planetary thrones”: λαμπήναις δ' ἐν ἰδίαις λέγονται εἶναι καὶ θρόνοις καὶ τοῖς τοιούτοις, ὅταν κατὰ δύο ἢ καὶ πλείους τῶν προεκτεθειμένων τρόπων συνοικειούμενοι τυγχάνωσι τοῖς τόποις ἐν οἷς καταλαμβάνονται, τότε μάλιστα τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτῶν πρὸς ἐνέργειαν ἀξιομένης διὰ τὸ ὅμοιον καὶ συμπρακτικὸν τῆς τῶν περιεχόντων δωδεκατημορίων ὁμοφύλου οικειότητος.

This is a reference to the essential dignity of the planets, to the natural affinity that is established between a planet and a sign (or degrees of a sign) on the basis of astronomical considerations. Never mind that Bouché-Leclercq, in his classic study *L'astrologie grecque* (1899, 197) finds these explanations spurious, noting their imperfect consistency in an amused tone, calling them “chimerical reasons” at best, “invented for the needs of the cause” at worse<sup>1</sup>. What matters is that the intention of Ptolemy, which we can hardly doubt, is to give scientific dignity to the apotelesmatic practices of Greek astronomy.

Ptolemy explains how the Sun, for example, is particularly at ease, master of his own house, when he is domiciled in Leo, because this is the sign where the Sun is located in the hottest season of the year, when the Earth undergoes the effects of solar radiation in the most obvious way (*Tetr.* I 17; I 19). In the same way, the Sun is in exaltation (or elevation) in the sign of Aries because 0° Aries marks the astronomical beginning of spring characterised by positive declination of the Sun and its increase, while it will be in his fall at the point of the autumnal equinox, in the sign of Libra, which sees the descent of the Sun in its annual, seasonal course<sup>2</sup>.

When two or more of these conditions – domicile, exaltation, diurnal or nocturnal triplicity, terms, faces – are fulfilled at the same time, the planet can be defined as ‘in its chariot’ or ‘throne’, ἰδιοθρονέω, according to Paul of Alexandria, or the Latin *in solio proprio insideo*<sup>3</sup>. A planet is also considered so when it is in its domicile and at the same time in a sign which accords with its nocturnal or diurnal nature<sup>4</sup>. Thus, the throne is a multiplication of the planet’s dignity.

This form of dignity is called essential because it pertains to the very nature of the planet and renders it good or bad, benefic or malefic, noble or unworthy. Planets in their thrones are in fact very effective. The power for good increases in benefics, the corrupting nature of malefics is mitigated. Those under the sun’s rays, invisible and potentially debilitated, instead do not lose their strength (Bezza 1990, 366). A planet so dignified offers the qualities of leadership and character that make one worthy of a throne.

One of the greatest commentators on Ptolemy, Gerolamo Cardano – astronomer, mathematician and distinguished astrologer – reminds us that the chariot or throne

<sup>1</sup> The French scholar favours a mythological explanation based on the so-called *thema mundi* (with Aries culminating) and connects the symbol of the bull with the Moon to justify the elevation of, respectively, the Sun in Aries and the Moon in Taurus (cf. Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 197 n. 1-2).

<sup>2</sup> This is true, obviously, for the Northern hemisphere.

<sup>3</sup> In chap. 36 of Boer-Neugebauer 1958, “to be enthroned” is listed among the conditions that give right to *oikodespoteia*. Cf. “in suis carpentis vehi et solis” in Philippus Melanchton’s Latin translation of *Quadripartitum* (Basel, Oporinus, 1553).

<sup>4</sup> Serapion (*CCAG* VIII/4 228,25) mentions the signs where the planets dwell as if they were on their thrones. According to Bezza 1994, these positions are to be referred to the second *chara* or *gaudium* described by Demophilus: Saturn in Aquarius, Jupiter in Sagittarius, Mars in Scorpio, the Sun in Leo, Venus in Taurus, Mercury in Virgo, the Moon in Cancer (*CCAG* V/4 228).

is the most noble of the dignities (Cardano 1578, I 16,182f.). It is more effective than the domicile or exaltation as it can include and accumulate them. According to Cardano, this condition manifests when a planet is in almost all its joys<sup>5</sup> and dignities. A man born with a significator planet on a throne, is well-liked by both his family and strangers, everything is granted him; he is confided in and has all he desires. He is, in short, a lucky man, who exudes authority and inspires natural obedience.

Although Cardano dwells on the Ptolemaic definition of a planet on the throne, evidently believing it to be of some weight and importance, Bouché-Leclercq points out that the deliberately scientific approach of the Alexandrian leads him to overlook the subtle distinctions that his contemporary astrological practice had probably retained.

There are in fact two distinct terms, λαμπήναι ‘bright floats’ (translated by the French scholar as “carrosses brillants”) and θρόνοι, but Ptolemy seems to have used them as synonyms, not daring to reduce one (Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 244). The Ptolemaic scholiast (Anon. 1559, 49) explains that the dignity of the bright seat or float is superior to that of the throne, since the λαμπήνη is a raised silver seat, while the θρόνος is a wooden seat, lower and less luxurious. “Il est probable que ces désignations venaient de Pétoisiris, c’est-à-dire d’un Alexandrin qui, se souvenant peut-être des ‘trônes’ sur lesquels Platon installe ses trois Mères, aura substitué ce siège majestueux à la barque, véhicule ordinaire des dieux et des décans égyptiens” (Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 245)<sup>6</sup>.

However, both Ptolemy and Porphyry agree to their significant equivalence, stating that planets thus dignified acquire so great a power as to make them immune, even from the debilitating effects of the sun’s rays (Porph. *Isag.* 190). If such a planet was rising, or angular and aspecting the Moon in the geniture, this would give authority and power to the native<sup>7</sup>.

But to rule effectively, a throne is not enough. You also need a footstool on which to place your feet, raising them up from contact with the lowly earth, which is only suitable for commoners, and to dominate them from on high. It is not enough to be just and magnanimous, virtues conferred by essential dignity, you must also be strong and successful. It is here that another form of dignity comes into play – accidental dignity – which shows favourable external or environmental conditions and strengthens the planet, increasing its capacity to act, or, failing that, weakening and debilitating it.

<sup>5</sup> Again a reference to the condition of *gaudium* (see note 4 above).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 245 n. 4: it is Proclus (*Anal. sacr.* V 2,138) who mentions Plato’s θρόνοι attributing the use of that term in astrological studies to Petosiris.

<sup>7</sup> Within the context of genethliology or natal astrology, the *native* is the subject of the celestial figure or chart under discussion. The term refers to the person who was born at a certain time in a certain place, as depicted by a specific birth chart (also called *natal chart* or *nativity*).

## 2. A throne together with the Sun

Among the forms of accidental dignity that elevate the planet, or the person it signifies, to a higher rank and distinction, there are some that clearly use this analogy with the royal seat. This is the case when a planet is conjunct the day-time luminary – the natural symbol of the King, of success and power – when this conjunction is within 16' of arc from the centre of the solar disk, both in ecliptic longitude and celestial latitude. Since the apparent size of the solar disk as seen from Earth varies from 31'29" to 32'33", being in the body of the sun from this prospect is to be within about 16' from its centre<sup>8</sup>.

A planet situated, thus, in the heart of the Sun, is in a position of the greatest accidental strength imaginable, dignified and protected by favour of the King, at the height of its influence. This exultant condition is called ἐγκάρδιος or συνοδικός by Greek writers, *samîm* by the Arabs, *in corde solis* in Latin, and is often referred to by medieval and modern writers as *cazimi*. One of the first to write about the power of the synodic planet seems to have been Serapion of Alexandria (CCAG VIII/4 230,19-22): οἱ δὲ συνοδικοί, δυναμοῦνται πως διὰ τὴν τοῦ φωτὸς τοῦ Ἡελίου μετουσίαν, τὰς δὲ ἐνεργείας ἐν τοῖς ὑστέριοις χρόνοις ἀποδιδόασιν, ἐὰν ᾧσιν ἐν χρηματιστικοῖς. μάλιστα δὲ ὁ Ἑρμῆς χαίρει συνοδικὸς ὦν καὶ ἐνεργῆς γίνεται· οἱ δ' ἀκρόνυχοι δυνατώτεροί εἰσιν μάλιστα νυκτὸς διὰ τὸ ὑπὲρ γῆν εἶναι.

Abraham Ibn-Ezra (Epstein 1998, 137 aph. 98) writes: “A planet joined with the Sun is like a person sitting with the king in one chair”.

The synodic planet does not enjoy a throne for its lofty virtues and qualities, as it would if it were endowed with great essential dignity, but only by virtue of benevolence and complacency of those in power. It has the opportunity to temporarily share the throne with the legitimate ruler. As long as it enjoys this favour, it can take advantage of its fortunate condition, which, however, is anything but stable. Astronomically, the duration of these favourable external conditions is indicated by the permanence of the exact conjunction to the Sun. But both the Sun and the planet which has been conceded a seat next to the luminary move along the ecliptic at different speeds. When the planet moves out of the conjunction it will lose the power granted it, which is not its own. That is why this form of dignity, no matter how effective, is defined accidental.

<sup>8</sup> This is the definition given by Bonatti 1550 in his *Liber Astronomiae* within the paragraph *De dustoria sive ayz planetarum* (XIII c., *tractatus III pars II, caput 7* col.136). Some authors are less strict and exacting: Sahl, for example, prescribes a whole degree for the partile conjunction with the Sun to be defined as *cazimi* (Sahl bin Bishr, *Introductorium de principii iudiciorum Zahelis Ysmaelitae*, in Dykes 2008, 41), while William Lilly requires 17' from the centre of the solar disc, but merely in longitude (cf. Lilly 1647, I 19,113: for an Italian translation of the text, see Nava 2018, 156).

### 3. The lunar nodes: from dragon to celestial footstool

The concept of elevation through being put on a celestial throne may occur even without a corresponding idiom to highlight it, but rather through a similar graphic analogy. The glyph for the Moon's North Node ( $\Omega$ ) recalls the image of a footstool, and how you can climb on it to oversee everything around you. It is in this way that the North Node increases the power of any planet or angle of the chart it conjuncts.

The nodes are the points where the Moon's path around the Earth, oblique with respect to the Sun's apparent path, crosses the ecliptic. The North Node represents the point of passage of the Moon from a South to North latitude with respect to the ecliptic, and vice versa for the South Node. If the Moon is  $0^\circ$  latitude and is rising above the ecliptic, it is in its ascending node. If it is falling below the ecliptic, it is in its descending node.

This simple astronomical observation has important consequences. The concepts of "above" and "below", north and south, positive or negative latitude, are significant in astrology. In fact, according to the traditional scheme, the northern latitude is configured as an accidental dignity, increasing the power to act of the planet in this condition. The higher the latitude north, the greater the height reached by the planet in the sky. Hence, the idea of the North Node as a sort of footstool on which to climb up on, to govern the surrounds, increasing the stature, power and strength of the planet in conjunction with it. It is like a trampoline that launches the planet to the top, to a dominant position.

Conversely, the conjunction with the South Node takes on the value of an accidental debility. The South latitude decreases the strength of the planet, and the South Node is the point at which the planet, not only metaphorically but also literally, begins to fall, losing dignity, power and position.

The traditional lunar node glyphs themselves suggest this analogy. The North Node ( $\Omega$ ) has an upward curve that recalls the outline of a stool, while the downward curve of the South Node ( $\text{♁}$ ) looks like a hole, a gorge in the ground. The astronomical reasons for this graphical notation are obvious and are reflected in the Greek definition given by Cumont (CCAG VIII/I 194):  $\acute{\omicron} \acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\beta\iota\beta\acute{\alpha}\zeta\omega\nu$  and  $\acute{\omicron} \kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\beta\iota\beta\acute{\alpha}\zeta\omega\nu$ , where the sense of the first is to raise up, promote, while the latter alludes to bringing down, to make fall<sup>9</sup>.

However, the temptation to explain astronomical effects with mythology often creeps into definitions, recalling the myth of the celestial dragon that devours the Sun during the eclipse, making it invisible. For an eclipse to occur it is necessary for the Earth, Moon and Sun to be aligned with each other. It is only when the Moon is conjunct the Sun in longitude and at the same time on one of the nodes,

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bezza 1990, 330: "l'uno corrisponde al latino *attollens*, *evehens* o anche *producens*, avendo il senso di far salire in alto e quindi di promuovere; il secondo a *deprimens* o *deducens* significando il far discendere verso il basso, il far calare".

the same as the Sun at 0° latitude, that the perfect overlap of the two celestial bodies causes a solar occultation visible from Earth. Instead, when the Moon is in opposition to the Sun and conjunct one of the nodes, the Earth's shadow interposes between the two luminaries, giving rise to an eclipse of the Moon.

The image of a dragon devouring the luminaries when the Moon's orbit intersects that of the Sun is the origin of the traditional definition of the ascending node as *caput draconis* and the descending node as *cauda draconis*. It is certainly due to this disconcerting mythological representation that both nodes are sometimes attributed a malefic or dangerous nature<sup>10</sup>. The first in a series of anonymous fragments on the lunar nodes collected and edited by Franz Cumont (*CCAG VIII/I* 195), tells of the dragon Athalia, in the form of a snake with two heads and two tails corresponding to the lunar nodes, considered by the Babylonians and Chaldeans to be the most malefic of the malefic stars: Βαβυλώνιοι ἤγουν Χαλδαῖοι ἀθαλίαν καλοῦσιν τοῦτον ὑπάρχοντα πνεῦμα δρακοντοειδές, δικέφαλον, δίουρον ... καὶ μᾶλλον τῶν κακοποιῶν ἀστέρων οὗτος κακοποιότερος τυγχάνει ὁ δὲ Τοξότης καὶ οἱ Δίδυμοι ὑπακούσιν αὐτῷ καὶ μείζονα τὰ κακὰ ἐν τούτοις ἀποτελεῖται καὶ ἡ μὲν κεφαλὴ οὐχ ὁμοίως κακὰ ἐργάζεται ὅσα καὶ ἡ οὐρὰ αὐτοῦ. Cardano, commenting on Ptolemy, recalls how *caput* and even more so *cauda* are believed to be both *loci pravi*, linked to diseases and deformities in the geniture (Cardano 1578, III 16,393).

Vettius Valens also attributes a generally negative influence to the lunar nodes. The position of the nodes is the basis of different methods of calculation with which to establish critical periods and predict the lifespan and the date of death. If the native falls sick at the moment when the Sun transits a node, then the illness will be dangerous, if not fatal<sup>11</sup>. In “elections”, that is, in choosing the most astrologically auspicious time to start a project, business or enterprise, the passage of the Moon on the nodes or points square or in opposition to the nodes (aspects of 90° and 180°) is considered such an unfortunate condition as to advise you not to do nor to undertake anything: better not to sail, to marry, to plant, to trade and not to establish businesses, as these activities would be doomed to fail<sup>12</sup>.

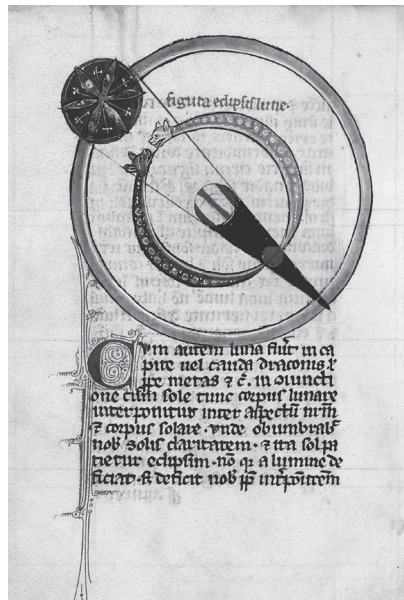
<sup>10</sup> Attribution of maleficity still in use in traditional Vedic astrology or Jyotish.

<sup>11</sup> Vett. Val. V 2,18-25: ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ [ἐὰν] ἐν τῷ Ἀναβιβάζοντι ἢ Καταβιβάζοντι ἢ ἐν τοῖς τούτων τετραγώνοις, γενήσεται ὁ ἐνιαυτὸς κλιμακτικὸς. ἐὰν δέ πως, Ἡλίου γενομένου κατὰ πάροδον ἐν τῷ Ἀναβιβάζοντι ἢ Καταβιβάζοντι ἢ ἐν τοῖς τετραγώνοις, κακοποιῶ ἐπιθεωροῦντος τὸν Ἥλιον, τότε κατακλιθῆ τις, ἐπισηφίης καὶ ἐπικίνδυνος ἢ κατὰ κλιση. αἱ δ' ἐπισημασίαι τῶν ἐπιτάσεων ἢ κινδύνων τότε γενήσονται, τῆς Σελήνης κατὰ τοὺς αὐτοὺς τόπους τοῦ Ἀναβιβάζοντος διαπορευομένης.

<sup>12</sup> Vett. Val. V 2,58-68: πρὸς δὲ τὰς καταγομένας ἡμέρας φυλακτέον, τῆς Σελήνης διαπορευομένης τὸν καιρικὸν Ἀναβιβάζοντα καὶ τὰ τούτου τετράγωνα καὶ διάμετρα, μάλιστα δὲ κατὰ τὰς αὐτὰς μοίρας, μὴ κατάρχεσθαι τινος, μὴ πλεῖν, μὴ γαμεῖν, μὴ ἐντυγχάνειν, μὴ κτίζειν, μὴ καταφυτεύειν, μὴ συνίστασθαι, μήτε τὸ καθόλου τι πράττειν οὔτε γὰρ βέβαιον κριθῆσεται τὸ γενόμενον οὔτε εὐσυντέλεστον, εὐμετανόητον δὲ καὶ ἀτελὲς καὶ

Considerations of different tone presented in Book I (Vett. Val. I 15,12-15), offer exceptions to this unfavourable picture, where only the North Node is recognized as having the capacity of elevation and exaltation confirmed by other writers. Benefic planets in aspect to the ascending node are confirmation of an active and prosperous geniture, with the possibility of rising to high rank even when the native is of humble origins: σκοπεῖν οὖν δεήσει ἐν τούτοις εἰ ἀγαθοποιοὶ εἰσιν, καὶ μάλιστα τῷ Ἀναβιβάζοντι· ἔσται γὰρ ἡ γένεσις εὖπορος καὶ πρακτικὴ· καὶ μετρία εὐρεθῆ ἢ ἐν καθαιρέσει γινομένη, ἀναβιβασθήσεται καὶ ἐν δόξῃ γενήσεται. οἱ δὲ κακοποιοὶ ἐκπτώσεις καὶ καταιτιασμοὺς ἀποτελοῦσιν.

The serpent *Athalia* – the celestial dragon – is often depicted as having two heads and two tails, even in much later documents, but it is certain that astronomers were looking at this legend as a simple attempt to generally explain celestial phenomena using an ingenuous symbol (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1:** Lunar eclipse. Johannes de Sacrobosco, *Tractatus de Sphaera* (MA 69, c. 112v. The New York Public Library). The celestial dragon has two heads and two tails. The Moon is exactly on *Cauda Draconis*. (From Incerti 2010, 145)

ἐπιζήμιον ἢ λυπηρὸν καὶ μὴ ἐπιμένον. ἐὰν δόξῃ τις ἐν αὐταῖς ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκπλοκὴν τινα πεποιηκέναι πράγματός τινος, ἀνασκευασθήσεται καὶ ἐπιτάραχον γενήσεται καὶ ἐπιζήμιον ἢ εὐκαθαίρετον καὶ προσκοπτικόν· οὐδὲ γὰρ οἱ ἀγαθοποιοὶ παρατυγχάνοντες τούτοις τοῖς τόποις πληρῆς ἀγαθόν τι πράξουσιν, ὅθεν καὶ ἄνευ γενέσεως ἐάν τις τὰς καιρικὰς παρόδους τῆς Σελήνης πρὸς τὸν Ἀναβιβάζοντα παραφυλάσῃ, οὐ διαμαρτήσεται.

Dorotheus of Sidon, in fact, appears to be completely aware of the true nature of the lunar nodes as simple points of intersection between celestial orbits, which, as such, acquire apotelesmatic value only in terms of the same characteristics of lunar motion (either towards North or South), of which they are a manifestation. It is in this light that his affirmations should be read (Dorot. Sid. *Carmen* V 43,1; I 12,10f.): “the head is called the ‘ascending’ and its tail the ‘descending’ ... Know that the Moon is best of all if it is increasing, rising in the sphere of heaven toward the North. This is an indication of prosperity and manly virtue for the native”<sup>13</sup>.

About a century later, Ptolemy, whose approach is decidedly scientific, is of the same opinion. The Alexandrian astronomer makes little mention of the nodes, and only as indicators of the Moon’s latitude (Ptol. *Tetr.* III 13; III 14).

The medieval Arab authors were to fully develop these considerations, together with their European successors. This is expressed, for example, by Abraham Ibn-Ezra in his *Reshith Hochma*: “The ancients said that the nature of the Dragon’s Head is to increase and the nature of the Tail is to decrease so when the benefic planets are with the Head, it will increase their good, and when the malefics are with it, it will increase their evil; [in the same way] when the benefics are with the Tail, it will decrease their good, and when the malefics are with it, it will decrease their evil. That is why the Hindu astrologer says that the Head is good with the benefics and bad with the malefics” (Epstein 1998, 108).

Therefore, being in conjunction with the nodes does not make the planet positive or negative, good or bad, benefic or malefic; these are, in fact, prerogatives of essential dignity. Even the dreaded Saturn, in dignity by domicile or exaltation, can give its best<sup>14</sup>. Instead, accidental dignity makes the planet stronger, for better or for worse, as it confers or takes away power<sup>15</sup>.

#### 4. A throne and a footstool

The combination of essential and accidental dignities allowed Greek astrologers to predict the success of an undertaking or the victory and prosperity of a ruler. However, the influence of Classical astrology has been long-lasting and persistent so, faithful to Hellenistic and Arabic tradition, European astrologers were to acquire

<sup>13</sup> Translated by Pingree 1976.

<sup>14</sup> Epstein 1998, 130, aph. 27: “Every planet, whether benefic or malefic, if it is in its domicile or domicile of exaltation, will always indicate good”. Obviously, even the reverse is true: any planet in his exile or fall, or deprived of essential dignity (peregrine) will tend to behave like a malefic.

<sup>15</sup> Bonatti agrees: “caput vero draconis est fortuna naturaliter, et de natura masculina, sed per accidens, aliquando sit infortuna. Est enim natura eius composita de natura Iovis, et de natura Veneris, et hoc habet augmentationem atque significare res quae augmentum suspiciunt, regnum scilicet et dignitates et substantiam, et sublimitatem atque fortunam bonam ... Unde cum fuerit cum fortunis, auget fortunam eorum, et cum fuerit cum malis, auget maliciam eorum, et tunc sit infortuna accidentaliter ... unde dictum est, quod caput sit cum fortunis fortuna, et cum malis malum, cauda vero cum bonis mala, et cum malis bona” (*Tract.* III 8, col. 119).



the same techniques, perhaps with less understanding of the astronomical reasons for such attributions, but with undiminished confidence in their predictive outcome.

Thus it was that in 1643, an astrologer such as William Lilly, faithful enough to the ancient tradition as to state his aim as “to make some peeces of Ptolomey speake English” (Lilly 1644, xii), could still use the planets in their thrones and the lunar nodes – the metaphor of the throne and the celestial stool – as such a powerful sign of moral, political and military superiority that it allowed him to predict the victory of Parliament against the absolutist expectations of Charles I<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. the horary question *A report that Cambridge was taken by the king's forces; if true?* (Lilly 1647, II 200f.). For a commentary on the text, see Nava 2019, 73f., 205-223.

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### **Abstract**

In an attempt to read the fortunes of kings and the powerful in the Ptolemaic sky, Hellenistic astrologers have often used the image of a throne and a stool, as a metaphor for elevation, exaltation, upward ascent, and success. These λαμπήναι or θρόνοι were the basis of interpretive techniques still in use in the Middle Ages and early modern period, to predict the success of an undertaking or the victory and prosperity of a ruler.