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Abū Maʿshar Jaʿfar ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar al-Balkhi

Keiji Yamamoto

Alternate name

Albumasar

Born **Balkh, (Afghanistan), possibly 787**

Died **Wāsiṭ, (Iraq), possibly 886**

Abū Maʿshar is best known for his astrological writings; however, he also wrote on other branches of the science of the stars, including astronomical tables. There is some question about his dates of birth and death because the former is based solely on an anonymous horoscope cited in his *Book of the Revolutions of the Years of Nativities*, while the latter comes from Ibn al-Nadīm, the 10th-century bookseller. But **Bīrūnī** tells us in his *Chronology of the Ancient Nations* that Abū Maʿshar made an observation in 892, and there is a reference by Abū Maʿshar himself in the *Book of Religions and Dynasties* to stellar positions due to trepidation dated 896/897. Both would have been made when Abū Maʿshar was well over 100 if the birth date is to be believed.

Ibn al-Nadīm reports in his *Fihrist* that Abū Maʿshar was at first a scholar of *ḥadīth* (prophetic traditions), was antagonistic toward the philosophical sciences (*i. e.*, Hellenistic science and philosophy), and sought to stir popular opinion against his contemporary **Kindī**, one of the champions of these sciences. By means of a ruse, Kindī sought to interest him in arithmetic and geometry. This apparently succeeded in mollifying Abū Maʿshar; though he never became proficient in mathematics, he did become interested later in life (at age 47) in astrology, another of the Hellenistic sciences. This late start, though, did not deter him because he was said to have lived to the ripe old age of 100. Since Abū Maʿshar was considered the greatest astrologer of the ʿAbbāsid court in Baghdad, his works were prominent, and therefore he was occasionally mentioned in tales on astrology. Ibn Ṭāwūs (1193–1266) collected several anecdotes on Abū Maʿshar in his *Faraj al-mahmūm* (Biographies of Astrologers).

All works on astronomy attributed to Abū Maʿshar are lost, and only his astrological works in Arabic are known to us. Much of our knowledge of his contribution to astronomy comes to us either from other sources or by way of information gleaned from his astrological works. Abū Maʿshar's

major astrological works that survive in Arabic manuscripts can be classified into three categories, based on the surviving manuscripts.

The first type is works that provide an introduction to astrology. Included in this group is Abū Maʿshar's 106-chapter work, *Kitāb al-mudkhal al-kabīr*, which he wrote "for the establishment of astrology by sufficient arguments and proofs." Not since **Ptolemy**'s *Tetrabiblos* had philosophical proofs of astrology been argued; Abū Maʿshar's philosophical basis was Aristotelian physics, which he had acquired through Kindī's circle. This work was translated into Latin in 1133 and 1140, and selections from it were translated into Greek *circa* 1000. The Latin translations had a significant influence on western European philosophers, such as **Albert The Great**. Abū Maʿshar also wrote an abridged version of his introductory work (*Kitāb mukhtaṣar al-mudkhal*), which was translated into Latin by **Adelard of Bath**.

The second type of work is Abū Maʿshar's historical astrology, which was introduced from the Sasanian tradition by al-Manṣūr, the second caliph of the ʿAbbāsid dynasty. This was part of his political strategy for laying a solid foundation for the newborn dynasty, and indeed it was used most effectively among the early ʿAbbāsids. Abū Maʿshar's monumental book on this subject, the *Kitāb al-milal wa-'l-duwal* (Book on religions and dynasties), is in eight parts in 63 chapters. The work was translated into Latin and read by **Roger Bacon**, **Pierre d'Ailly**, and Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), and discussed in their major works. Other works in this category include *Fī dhikr ma tadullu ʿalayhi al-ashkhāṣ al-ʿulwiyya* (On the indications of the celestial objects [for terrestrial things]), *Kitāb al-dalālāt ʿalā al-ittiṣālāt wa-qirānāt al-kawākib* (Book of the indications of the planetary conjunctions...), and the *Kitāb al-ulūf* (Book of thousands), which is no longer extant but is preserved in summaries by **Sijzī**.

The third and final type is Abū Maʿshar's works on genethlialogy, the science of casting nativities. An example is *Kitāb taḥāwil sinī al-mawālīd* (Book of the revolutions of the years of nativities). The first five parts in 57 chapters (out of nine parts in 96 chapters) were translated into Greek *circa* 1000, and the Greek text was translated into Latin in the 13th century. Another work in this genre is *Kitāb mawālīd al-rijāl wa-'l-nisā'* (Book of nativities of men and women). The large number of extant manuscripts suggests its high popularity in the Islamic world.

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