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JOANNA KOMOROWSKA

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At the End of Times

Human civilization and a Roman astrologer (Firmicus Maternus Math. 3. 1)*

Joanna Komorowska

«Time is thought to be the movement of the sphere» (Δοκεῖ ὁ χρόνος εἶναι ἡ τῆς σφαίρας κίνησις) – formulated in the *Physics*, this observation of Aristotle¹ reflects a near instinctive tendency of humans to link the perceived flow of time with regular changes of the night sky. Even at its most visible level the course of our life is measured by the ever changing alignment of the sky, manifest divisions into days and seasons giving way to more elaborate systems of weeks, months and years.² Yet, it is not only the abstract time measurement that relies on celestial movements: our everyday life appears effectively governed by the very same instance we employ for the more abstract calculations. The close connection between the sublunary and the fixed spheres, surviving into the modern era, was even more deeply felt in ancient times – time of sowing and harvest, season of navigation and season of *mare clausum*, even days suitable for surgical intervention were established with reference to the risings and settings of northern constellations or with respect to the current Moon phase. The simple presence of *parapegmata*, astronomical calendars enabling –among other things – easy calculation of date between various calendar systems of the ancient *oikoumene*, would be a tangible reminder of this closeness between the two spheres.³ Indeed, in the first century BC Geminus of Rhodes, a pupil of the great Stoic philosopher and polymath Poseidonios, linked

* The present work has benefited from many helpful suggestions of the anonymous referee for EPEKEINA, to whom I extend my most sincere gratitude. Translations from the *Mathesis* are my own.

1. *Phys.* 223b 21, (tr. by HARDIE 1984). The Neoplatonic *exegetae* emphasize that the reason for equaling time with the movement of celestial bodies lies in the unique nature of *κυκλοφορία*, considered to be the only uniform (*ὁμολήης*) kind of movement (compare *Simpl. in Phys. IV* p. 769. 1-7 D.).

2. That the day/night alteration is the clearest and most easily observed manifestation of time was duly noted by Alexander of Aphrodisias in his (lost) commentary on the *Physics*, as quoted by *Simpl. in Phys. IV* p. 768. 28-35 D.

3. The *parapegmata* are extensively studied in LEHOUX 2007. For the list of surviving source material see *ibid.* p. 147-216.

the very birth of astrological theory to the ease with which the causal connection can be superimposed on this widely spread astronomical or astrometeorological knowledge: heat of summer, rising of the Nile, etesian winds, appear not so much as correlates but as results of the changes wrought by the set heliacal risings (or settings), the regular, yearly return of meteorological or terrestrial phenomena being thus mistakenly regarded as being causally connected to the recurrent stellar conditions.⁴ In a strikingly similar manner, the temporal coincidence is skillfully exploited by the second century astronomer, Claudius Ptolemy, when arguing in favor of basic astrological tenets in his *Apotelesmatica* I 2: starting with the obvious influence exercised on 'our' surroundings by the Sun, and then, with the Moon's sway over terrestrial waters including the sea (both points being easily confirmed by everyday experience), the astronomer proceeds to argue for the influence of the five planets and for the sway exercised by the fixed stars.⁵

Still, the birth of astrology forms only one among many effects of the deeply felt connection between celestial firmament and the changes that can be perceived in our world: another, possibly even more important, consequence is that man grows used to thinking in terms of cycles – after all, cyclic repetition influences his everyday activities, summer being inexorably superseded by autumn and then, winter, day being succeeded by night, the sign of Pisces by that of Aries, etc. Every so often, on larger or smaller scale, events repeat themselves; this assumption allows men to enjoy peaceful sleep in expectation of the coming dawn, to gather provisions in order to weather the storms of winter, to expect flooding of the Nile at the rising of Sirius. The same assumption facilitates the use of *parapegmata* and enables men to enjoy the benefits of astrology. And yet, in spite of all that repetitiveness, our own mortality forces us to think in terms of finiteness and closure: humans are born and perish; once dead, they do not return to the living.⁶ At the risk of appearing too modern-minded, one may

4. Compare *Elem. Astron.* c. 17, p. 180-201 M. For astronomical content see LEHOUX 2007, 3-26.

5. The argument is carefully analyzed in LONG 1982.

6. The gap between life and death is subject of many mythological tales aimed at emphasizing the irreversibility of death or, conversely, the unique nature of mortal life.

assume that because of this finiteness our time (understood as time of our mortal existence) acquires a linear quality: simultaneously, its finiteness can be seen as corresponding to the increased irregularity of movement in the sublunary sphere.

Now, as to the actual subject of the present inquiry: Firmicus Maternus' *Mathesis* is a massive work written by a Roman senator and man of letters, Iulius Firmicus Maternus, who carefully designed his composition as a manual of planetary astrology⁷ – hence, it focuses on various positions of the seven *planetae* within the Zodiacal cycle, their position with respect to the cycle of daily rotation, their aspects, on the significance domiciles and the significance these latter acquire according to their position with respect to the Zodiac, and then, at the close, on the influence of the fixed constellations, the so called *paranatelonta*. Dated for the period before Firmicus' conversion to Christianity, and thus preceding his *De errore paganarum religionum*, it displays several features which may be taken as anticipating his decision, such as preoccupation with problems of theodicy, certain disillusionment with humankind as such, or deep admiration for remote and perfect deity.⁸ The tone of the work, nevertheless, is predominantly practi-

As for literature, it is possibly most frequently stressed in lyric poetry, cfr e.g. Horace *Carm.* 2. 14; still, the most persuasive example of the special, once only, quality of life is Achilles in *Odyssey's* Book Eleven.

7. The aim specified in *Math.* 1. pr. 5-7 and repeated in the proem to Book Two (2. pr. 3). It is important to remember that Firmicus, contrary to Vettius Valens or Paulus Alexandrinus, was not a professional practitioner (neither was he a scientist of Ptolemy's type, striving to rethink astrological lore in such a manner as to render it compatible with contemporary notion of science), but rather, somewhat like his great Roman predecessor, Manilius, a learned man displaying his erudition in writing on astrological matters (this does not necessarily imply he held no actual interest in the lore). On Firmicus' interest in astrology cfr e.g. MONAT 1992, 20-21; 23-24. One also notes the rather dismissive remarks of BOUCHÉ-LECLERCQ 1899, 494, n. 2.

8. It needs to be said that these tendencies are hardly unique for Firmicus: the subject of justice is a common theme in the astrological works (cfr Manilius, *Astr.* 4. 94-121), while the yearning for order and supreme, perfect deity appears nearly omnipresent in philosophical literature of the period (as discussed by NORDEN 1913, 233-237 and others; for a brief overview of Firmicus' possible inspiration see MONAT 1992, 21-23). Hence, while it is hardly my contention that the elements detectable in Firmicus' work necessitated his conversion, it may be speculated that they may have contributed to his religious choices. Then, it needs to be noted that certain intellectual continuity between the *Mathesis* and the *De errore* has been stressed e.g. by CHAPOT

cal, theoretical reflection being for the most part limited to proems (the most important of those, the main proem containing the defense of astrological doctrine as such, extends over the whole Book One). Among rare exceptions to this rule are chapter on astrological life (2. 30), seemingly a variation on the theme of perfect philosophical life so frequent in the imperial literature,⁹ but also an interesting testimony to the dangers of practicing divinatory astrology in the era of Constantine and his immediate successors,¹⁰ and chapter on *thema mundi*, relating to the inherited astrological dogma of the universal *genitura* (3. 1). It is this latter that forms the focus of my present discussion.

The *thema*

Mathesis 3. 1 is a fascinating document of both astrological theory and ancient critical attitude (additionally, it attests to the rhetorical skill of Maternus himself): containing the *thema mundi*, the nativity of the world, it nonetheless disclaims its authenticity. Such a disclaimer, bearing possible similarity to the rhetorical *anticipatio*, is somewhat unusual in an astrological work: the surviving sources indicate a preference for positive support of contestable (or even questionable) *dogmata*, a support usually sought in claims of supernatural or visionary experiences (such is the case with the length of life calculation in Vettius Valens' *Anthologiarum libri*).¹¹ Still, in rejecting all claims to genuineness and acknowledging the *a posteriori* nature of the nativity, Firmicus can be seen as making even more powerful cause for theoretical validity of the *thema* as a didactic paradigm, a paradigm of such a superior nature as to appear almost inspired. Interestingly, his reasons for the disclaimer bring in to mind the common sense objections to astrological lore present in the discourses of Sextus Empiricus (in Book Five

2001.

9. Compare for example Plutarch *PQ* 1 *pas.* (999c-1000e), Alcinous *Didasc.* c. 1, and others.

10. For the discussion, see KOMOROWSKA 1999, for the briefer treatment cfr SOGNO 2005.

11. Cfr Vettius Valens *Anth.* 4. 11, discussed in KOMOROWSKA 2004, 248-259 *et al.* Significantly, divine inspiration was invoked in support of the doctrine by the original authors, apparently relying for their teachings on Hermes Trismegistus himself, cfr 3. 1.1: *quibus potentissimum Mercurii numen istius scientiae secreta commisit.*

of his *Adversus mathematicos*) or Favorinus (as surviving in Gellius' *Noctes Atticae* 14. 1): in the essence, Firmicus admits that since nobody had actually witnessed the birth of the universe, it is highly improbable that one could actually know the respective positions of planets.¹² He accepts the challenge posed by such an admission, adding yet another argument *contra*, alluding to the problems caused by the universal *redintegratio*, the reconstruction or reestablishment of the world that is supposed to occur every 300 thousand years (given the feebleness of the human mind it would be impossible to penetrate all mysteries of the entire universe in the relatively brief period contained within a single cosmic cycle).¹³ For him, the *thema*, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus himself (*Mercurii potentissimum numen*) and found in Aesculapius' *Moerogenesis* (or *Myriogenesis*, 3. 1. 2)¹⁴ is an invention, an artificial construct of human mind. Still, it is an invention of extreme brilliance – in its current form, it reveals eternal truths of both astrology and universal order. To quote his very words, *non fuit ista genitura mundi* («it was not the nativity of the world», 3. 1. 9) and later: *genitura mundi diuina coniecturae interpretatione composita est* («the world's nativity was composed through a divine conjecture», 3. 1. 15). Yes, this is not the true depiction of heavens as they had been at the beginning of time: yet, it is an inspired guess, a skillful conjecture which reflects the true nature of things, instructing practitioners in the actual use of the

12. See NA 14. 1. 8 sq. or AM 5. 49 sq.. The analogy is of tone rather than actual content: thus, for example, while Favorinus does not refer to the universal *thema*, he does refer to the traditional assumption concerning the birth of astrology among Chaldeans, which would effectively eliminate any inquiry into reality other than the Chaldean, complicate the interpretations concerning planetary positions etc. It is a common sense objection, one that could be easily modified to ridicule the idea of world-nativity. Favorinus also mentions problems affecting the nativities because of the difficulty related to marking the exact moment of birth or conception (as indeed does Sextus, AM 5. 55-72) – this probably could also apply to the notion of universal nativity.

13. Compare 3. 1. 9: *nec eo usque se intentio potuit humanae fragilitatis extendere, ut originem mundi facili posit ratione aut concipere aut explicare, praesertim cum CCC milibus annorum maior apocatastasis, id est redintegratio, per epyrosin aut per cataclysmum fieri consueuerit.*

14. The title remains uncertain – while the manuscripts uniformly call for *Myriogenesis*, Monat, relying on the astrological interest in the interpretation of Zodiacal grades (*moirai*) plausibly suggests emendation to *Moerogenesis* (cfr MONAT 1994, 285, n.6).

art of genethliology. Thus understood, the *thema* forms a spectacular exemplification of astrological *genitura*, a paradigm to be emulated in any actual inquiry. To quote Firmicus himself:

Sed ut esset quod mathematici in genituris hominum sequerentur exemplum, ideo hanc quasi genituram mundi diuini uiri prudenti ratione finxerunt (3. 1. 10)

In their prudent wisdom, however, the learned men invented this particular *thema* so that astrologers would have an example to follow in construction of the human nativities.

It is probably because of this artificial nature of the *thema* that Firmicus does not advocate an actual employment of this tenet in an introductory, basic course of astrology: to discuss the *thema* too early would unduly confuse minds of the aspiring students, thus hindering all further learning, a point stressed in 3. 1. 17:

*quam [i.e. genituram - JK] in libro institutionis explicare non debui, ne rudes discentis animos expositio ista obscura interpretatione turbaret*¹⁵

I could not discuss the nativity in the introductory book, for it could have confused the unschooled minds of the students.

Still, there are compensations for this apparent difficulty: in conjecturing the *thema*, ancient astrologers provided us with something far more precious than a simple example of astrological prognostication: they gave us an account of *origo et cursus humani generis* (3. 1. 15), beginnings and development of humankind, or an astrological history of the human world. And though this insight remains a side effect of the original, didactic purpose, the resulting description which allows one an insight into many astrological tenets such as the sequence of Zodiacal signs or the doctrine of planetary domiciles, is nevertheless interesting in its own right. It seems noteworthy that the historical aspect of the *thema* gains some support from the remarks made by

15. The didactics' problem returns in 3. 1 with astonishing frequency: the *genitura* being composed for primarily didactic reasons (10), Firmicus emphasizes the due order of instruction, stressing the importance of compatibility between intellectual advancement of the student and the intricacy of doctrines taught (17), and, finally, highlights the importance attached to the accessibility of actual exposition (19).

Firmicus himself: in accordance with the previously displayed skepticism concerning the *thema*'s authenticity, he reaffirms the *a posteriori* character of this 'prognostication' (the *thema* is described as composed *ex his itaque, quae per ordinem gesta sunt, et iis quicumque hominum succedentium temporum mutationem fecerunt*; «according to what has happened in certain order, and to what occasioned changes in the humans of each successive era», *ibid.*; manifestly, the changes described in the *thema* have already been wrought on the world). Still, in this acknowledgement, he also implicitly emphasizes the adequacy of the *genitura* as well as its completeness.

From the purely astronomical point of view Firmicus' *thema* is openly incredible, the elongation of Mercury and Venus exceeding the possible values; yet, at the same moment, it strikes one as extraordinarily harmonious and, indeed, beautiful, with planets and *kenetra* positioned centrally in the respective signs, each planet in its own domicile (3. 1.1):

Sun Leo 15; Moon Cancer 15; Saturn Capricorn 15; Jupiter Sagittarius 15; Mars Scorpio 15; Venus Libra 15; Mercury Virgo 15; Asc. Cancer 15

Such an arrangement locates the Moon in the Ascendant point, with the Sun following in the *epanaphora Ascendentis*, all planetary bodies linked by an intricate, yet precise net of aspects, their positions enabling further linkage through the doctrine of transits and justifying the orderly sequence of *chronokrateia*, which, as we will see, passes through all the planets in downward order. As a result, this artificial *genitura* provides justification for several astrological dogmas, including the sequence of the Zodiac¹⁶ and the theory of planetary domiciles. Yet,

16. Interestingly, Firmicus expressly claims that full understanding of Zodiacal circle and the sequence of the signs would be impossible without the *thema*: *Cur autem initium signorum XII ab Ariete esse uoluerunt, etiam hoc nunc explicandum [id] est, quod in libro institutionis [explicauimus] quaestio illa explicari non poterat, nisi fuisset mundi monstrata genitura, quam in libro institutionis explicare non debui...;* (3. 1. 17).

Thus, it is in the *thema* that we find conclusive and satisfactory explanation for the privileged position of Aries: in the *genitura*, it hosts the *Medium Caeli*, a point considered by many to be of primary importance in any nativity, and further, it is well aspected by the planets (3. 1. 17-18).

it is not all it does: quite possibly its most important aspect is the corroboration of the theory formulated so clearly in the proem to Book Three of the *Mathesis: hominem, quasi minorem quendam mundum esse* (3. pr. 3).¹⁷ The universe appears governed by the very principles which shape individual lives, influence the fate of nations and kingdoms – even one keeping in mind the reservations expressed with respect to *thema*'s authenticity would be swayed by the analogy manifested in its composition and exegesis. It is not only that man belongs to the physical world (which in itself would account for the sway exercised over the species by the celestial bodies): a deep similarity exists between the two, effectively influencing the perception of the universe and its evolution as it appears in the present chapter. Like man, the world, as seen through its *thema*, is defined both by the regularity of cyclic movement and, at the same moment, by the ineluctable progression from birth to destruction. An important reservation needs to be made at this point: two senses of *mundus* seem to coexist in Firmicus' chapter: on the one hand, he discusses *mundus* understood as the universe, ie. the totality of all living beings (the use being particularly evident in his discussion of *apokatastasis*, 3. 1. 9), on the other, the terms refers to the human world, ie. the civilization. It will serve to remember this ambiguity – it will ultimately reflect on the understanding of ages and progress.

The *apokatastasis*

Let us briefly consider the picture resulting from the *thema* and its underlying assumptions: the existence of this particular universe remains limited in time (notwithstanding the implied aspect of eternity which may appear contrary to the concept of periodic catastrophe) – at some point, in fact every 300 thousand years, it is bound to perish by fire or water, two elements known to cause death in human beings as well – this particular aspect is duly emphasized by Firmicus, who notes:

Apocatastasin per ecpyrosin et per cataclysmum fieri et nos diximus et ab omnibus comprobatur. Substantia etiam corporis, completo uitae cursu, simili ratione dissolvitur (3. 1. 16)

17. For the contents of the proem and the *minor mundus* doctrine compare KOMOROWSKA 2011.

That apokatastasis happens either through conflagration or flood, is accepted both by us and by others; after all, the substance of every living body is analogously dissolved once it has completed its time.

Universal destruction follows the very same rule which governs life and destruction of the human body, or rather, conversely, the world is destroyed by what is also destructive to human body. In Firmicus' own words:

Sic omnifariam ad imitationem mundi hominem artifex natura composuit, ut, quicquid substantiam mundi aut dissolvit aut format, hoc etiam hominem et formaret et solueret (3. 1. 16).

The creating nature construed the human in total imitation of the world in such a way that whatever dissolves or shapes the substance of the latter must also form or dissolve that of the former.

Clearly, triumph of either fiery or watery element equals death (excessive drought or humidity are consistently seen as destructive in the ancient thought),¹⁸ hence highlighting the essential and purposeful similarity between the two – after all, as we learn in *Math.* 3. proem. 2:

... corpus hominis, ut mundi, ex quattuor elementorum commixtione composuit, ignis scilicet et aquae, aeris et terrae, ut omnium istorum coniunctio temperata animal ad formam diuinae imitationis ornaret; et ita hominem artificio diuinae fabricationis exposuit ut in paruo corpore omnem elementorum uim atque substantiam natura cogente conferret, ut diuino illi spiritui, qui ad sustentationem mortalis corporis ex caelesti mente descendit, licet fragile sed simile mundo pararet hospitium.

it composed human body, like that of the world, of four elements, that is fire, water, air and earth, so that the tempered conjunction of all these would adorn the living being resulting in a likeness of the divine; and thus was human formed by the art of divine ordering that nature could insert into his small body every power and substance of the elements. In this way a small, but world-like abode could be given to that divine spirit which descends from the divine intellect in order to elevate a mortal body.

The text highlights two points of particular importance for the present inquiry: first, there is the already mentioned elemental parallel

18. The dangers of extreme cold and heat are subject of recurrent interest in structural considerations of ancient myths (compare DETIENNE 1993, 5-36 *et al.*).

connecting human beings and the universe, second, the possible superiority of the latter. After all, a human body was made in the likeness of the universe, thus remaining manifestly secondary to the latter. The point, we shall see, will prove quite important for the notion of human condition as it is advanced by the Roman senator.

At this point, it needs to be emphasized that the concept of periodic catastrophe or, indeed, the idea of elemental similarity between man and universe, are hardly new: they figure prominently in another Roman author, Seneca, who (in accordance with the often contested Stoic tendency) emphasizes the necessity of cyclic catastrophe and reformation of the world in his *Naturales quaestiones*.¹⁹ Through divine will, the world is destroyed and then reborn – still, this reborn world appears to improve on the lost one. This positive aspect of Senecan vision, highlighted in Motto's study,²⁰ remains absent from Firmicus' account: in fact, no express indications are given of the character of the 'coming' reality. Additionally, one has to consider the openly expressed reservations about the fragility of human cognitive efforts when confronted with the limitedness of time (3. 1. 9) – it appears that human knowledge, even if acquired in the course of ages, remains necessarily flawed – such an observation does not bode well for any potential improvement in the future world cycles.

In astrological lore, the concept of world's finiteness stems from assumptions concerning the great return (moment when all planets and stars return to their original positions, the *apokatastasis*).²¹ What may

19. While the issue returns at several points, the most illuminating description is provided in *NQ* 3. 29. 1-30. 7; clearly, the date of the final catastrophe has been set right at the beginning (a fact reflecting both the Stoic fatalism, and the deeply felt connection between birth and (incumbent) death). One also notes the final tone of his assertion in *NQ* 3. 29. 9: *unus humanum genus condet dies*. Thus described, the end appears quick and definite. One also notes that Seneca pays considerable attention to the possible dangers of elemental imbalance at the beginning of his description of universal flood (*NQ* 3. 27. 3 sq.).

20. MOTTO 1984, 232-233.

21. For the extensive study of the great year doctrine in both astrology and philosophy, see CALLATAÏ 1996 *pas.*; for a brief outline of the history of the *apokatastasis* doctrine compare e.g. RAMELLI 2007. Interestingly, this is not the only cycle featuring in the *Mathesis*: a greater year (*maior annus*) of another length, one of 1461 years (the near length of the Sothic cycle mentioned e.g. by the third century antiquarian and astrologer Censorinus, *de die nat.* 18.10, where the given number is 1460), appears in

however be striking in Firmicus' work is the apparent lack of possible moral dimension²² – the final destruction is subsequent, but hardly incumbent, on the deterioration of morals and on cultural stagnation. It comes by virtue of the universe being temporally limited, nothing else. Clearly, it can be argued that the periodic destruction becomes a necessity because of the gradual deterioration of the world, but both of these, as we shall see, are included in the general pattern – no causal relation appears to exist between moral deterioration and the final catastrophe: in no way can this latter be considered a punishment or a warning.

Vita

While the ineluctable end appears consistently stressed in the *Math.* 3.1, much is also said concerning *cursus humani generis*, the life course of humankind. In the course of its existence, the world (this time understood as world of humans) undergoes a series of changes, each of them coming at predefined moment and following upon those by-gone in a pre-established sequence (the sequence remains irreversible, with no repetition of opportunities gone and lost). This sequence and actual character of the respective celestial influences depend on two important factors: the aspect originally linking given planet with the luminaries (Sun and Moon) and the aspect due to the subsequent planetary movement (transit), namely the aspect formed when in the 'other' domicile (in Classical astrology every planet except luminaries is granted two domiciles).²³ Thus justified by the original arrangement

Math. I 5.

22. This universal indifference to the good/evil is highlighted throughout Book One, where the astrologer discusses fate's tendency to favor the wicked, as exemplified by L. Cornelius Sulla (1. 7. 37 sq.) and others. On the presence and importance of Sulla in Firmicus' work, see HÜBNER 2005.

23. Firmicus provides a brief but instructive explanation in 3. 1. 3-7. Thus, for example, Jupiter, originally positioned in Sagittarius and hence linked by powerful trigonal aspect with lord of diurnal sect and the masculine luminary, i.e. the Sun, achieves similar connection with the Moon, lord of the female, nocturnal sect, when relocated to his other domicile, Pisces. As for the decreasing power of aspects: the sequence opens with opposition (Saturn; the 180° degrees distance), it passes through trigon (Jupiter and Mars), to quadrature (Venus), with the mere communal nature of Mercury accounting for the link with either night or day rulers (actually, while the

of planets the resulting rulership sequence illustrates the manifold uses of the transit doctrine. Interestingly, it also reflects the descending order of planets: from Saturn to Mercury, the world is ruled by every planet except the two luminaries, in an order reflecting the decreasing power (and quality) of planetary aspects. Consequently, human history is divided into five stages, each of these sharing in the qualities of its *chronocrator*, planetary ruler, the historical time appearing simultaneously continuous and fragmented. In other words, Firmicus, at least as it is manifested in the discussed passage, perceives world history as a continuous unity, subdivided into five major sections, each of those corresponding to a specific stage in the civilizational development of humankind. For development it certainly is, men having gradually evolved from the bestial creatures of Saturnian era to the sophisticated, if malicious, beings ruled by the ‘ultimate’ *chronocrator* Mercury. Should we pay closer attention to the developmental aspect of Firmicus description, a following outline appears:

- the opening era of Saturn (the first planet to form an aspect with the Moon according to the transit doctrine) is so uncivilized as to merit description with adjectives *agrestis* and *horridus* (3. 1. 11): men are bestial, their behavior ungoverned by any principles of law or custom;²⁴

original position, the 15° Virginis, puts the planet in sextile aspect with the Moon in 15° Cancri, the transit to Gemini locates it in the very same position with respect to the original Sun in 15° Leonis).

24. One notes that in Firmicus’ rendition, the reign of Saturn is far from human in character: *quia enim prima origo mundi inculta fuit et horrida et agresti conuersatione effera, et quia rudes hominis prima et incognita sibi uestigia lucis ingressos politae humanitatis ratio deserebat, Saturni hoc agreste et horridum tempus esse uoluerunt, ut ad imitationem huius sideris <in> initiis † uitae constituta mortalitas agresti se conuersatione et inhumana feritatis exasperatione duraret* (3. 1. 11). This negative judgment is reiterated (by way of contrast) in the description of the era of Jupiter: *deserto pristini squaloris horrore et agrestis conuersationis feritate seposita* (3. 1. 12). The world of that era appears cold and cruel as indeed was the nature of the star, often contrasted with the Sun and frequently associated with aridity and coldness of death (by way of comparison, Ptolemy in *Tetr.* 2. 3 associates the Saturn-governed air trigon with the barbaric tribes of Northern Asia on one hand, and the vast deserts and wild tribes of African North on the other). Manifestly, there are no positive aspects of this era – one cannot detect any reflexes of the idea of the golden age, no traces of the concept of primitive happiness or nobility; this contrasts e.g. with the Senecan

- *cultus* appears in the era of Jupiter: this is time of the discovery of both custom and legal norm (*cultior uita hominum purgatis moribus redderetur*; «life of men became more civilized with the correction of their customs», 3. 1. 12);²⁵
- the dominion of Mars results in discovery of practical *technai* (*omnia artium ac fabricationum ornamenta conciperet*; «it conceived all the ornaments of arts and crafts», 3. 1. 12);
- the rule of Venus reveals the benefits of learned and polished conversation, as well as scientific rigor of theoretical knowledge (*hoc tempus, quo mores hominum sermo doctus excoluit et quo homines singularum disciplinarum naturali scientia formati sunt*; «the time, when learned speech shaped human manners, while men themselves were formed by the natural knowledge of individual sciences», 3. 1. 13);²⁶
- since the human world is already complete, nothing is left for the age of Mercury except elaboration of prior achievements - this lack of challenge engenders boredom, which in turn brings forth the negative aspects of humanity, as men turn to misuse of their skills (3. 1. 14).

There are two important aspects to such a portrayal – the first is prevalently astrological and hence, of no particular interest in the present consideration, focused as the latter is on the problems of world-image, the other, one may say, more general – after all, Firmicus provides his readers with a comprehensive if sketchy description of the evolution of human civilization, emphasizing the sequence of discoveries (a fact of possible axiological importance), or reflecting on possible causes of moral or cultural deterioration of the ‘ultimate’ period. Interestingly, his focus is on the more intellectual sphere of human activity:

account of progress (for the issue see MOTTO 1984, 234-235 or TUTRONE’s study in the present volume).

25. The results of Jupiter’s rule appear clearly in the societal existence of humans as described further, when dealing with the dominion of Mars: *rectum uitae cursum ingressa mortalitas et iam humanitatis quadam moderatione composita* (3. 1. 12).

26. The link between Venus and liberal arts was widely known, e.g. the image of firmament in Irenaeus *Demonstratio* 9, with the fifth sphere corresponding to knowledge.

no mention of commerce, sea-travel or martial arts emerges in his description²⁷ – instead, we are faced with progression from law to what we may probably understand as *artes liberales* – indeed, one could say that Firmicus’ humans evolve by exercising their intellectual abilities. Such an outlook seems compatible with the philosophical theories emphasizing the uniqueness (and the intrinsic supremacy) of men *qua* intelligent beings, theories forming an accepted assumption in many philosophical doctrines. In Firmicus’ account, three phases of humanity’s life are devoted to purely intellectual development, to discovery and mastering of arts and crafts which improve human life. Nonetheless, the very intellectual power which motivates this development hides a potential danger – misused (or abused), it abolishes accepted norms, undermines existing order, dishonors arts and crafts. Effectively, it becomes a travesty of what it had once been, causing the world to turn into a dangerous, lawless place – a place somewhat resembling, though for very different reasons, the world that had once been. This, in fact, is what happens during the reign of Mercury. Humans still use their intellectual powers – this use, however, turns to evil, to exercise of *nefas* and *scelus*. It seems advisable to quote the text in its original form:

Purgatis agrestibus studiis, repertis artibus disciplinisque compositis, per diuersos actus humani se generis exacuit intentio, et quia mobile ingenium in homine unum uitae cursum seruare non potest, ex uariis institutis moribusque confusis malitiae creuit improbitas, et audacia scelerum flagitia gens hominum hoc tempore facinorosis machinationibus et inuenit et tradidit (3. 1. 14).

Once the uncultivated pursuits had been banished, arts discovered and sciences ordered, human acuity was perfected via diverse occupations; but since human intellect, mobile as it is, cannot stay on one course, fatal iniquity started to grow through confusion of established norm and custom – hence, at this time mankind invented

27. Due to limited scope of this paper, there is no place to draw extensive comparisons between the progress of Firmicus and the respective notion as appearing in Manilius, Seneca, Pliny the Elder or other Roman authors (for the respective studies see ROMANO 1979, MOTTO 1984, SCHENKEVELD 1998, and others). A reappraisal of Seneca’s conception of progress and its intellectual background can now be found in TUTRONE (this volume), who also carries out an interesting comparison with the views of Manilius and Pliny the Elder.

many outrageous and criminal offences and passed them on through unholy machinations.

The madness of Mercury, the malice and the decline of this final, hybridic age, even if forming the last stage in humanity's long life, remains intrinsically linked to man's greatest asset: his intellect.²⁸ In the absence of challenge, human intelligence becomes the greatest danger, trapping men in constant questioning of established data, and ultimately pushing them into misuse of this gift, as it is employed in the service of lower faculties.²⁹ In other words, the achievement of man's greatness, the fulfillment of the original promises of his intelligence, and the related arrest of progress (as understood in terms of Lovejoy and Boas, Dodds, and others)³⁰ precedes a phase of involution and deterioration, a phase one could view as the old age of mankind. In this grim period, one may surmise, every achievement becomes tainted by misuse, the powers of intellect ultimately dim, weakened by vain and idle pursuits; consumed by *scelus* and given to *malitia*, humans appear to fall short of the achievements of previous eras, thought and language no longer serving the noble needs of discovery and improvement. While this is not expressly stated in Firmician account, one may easily gain an impression that this last stage of human development is to be understood as a perversion of social intercourse, the omnipresent malice eroding the very achievement that opened way to all further successes and achievements, ie. legal and social norms, the original

28. Similar tone of anxiety concerning the actual deployment of many arts discovered by men can be detected in Lucretius' *de rerum natura* (5. 1421-25) or Seneca's *Naturales quaestiones* (while sea travel was originally invented for reasons of free interchange of goods and intellectual curiosity, it serves to feed greed and ambition, *NQ* 5. 18). Interestingly, the description of Mercury's reign corresponds to the effects of the Moon's transition from Venus to Mercury (a movement expressly repeating that which occasions the passing of world epochs) as described in 4. 13. 1-2: while the *Luna crescens* gives birth to those who deal in female costume, dress, medicine or athletics (still, it affects them negatively by increasing the strength of sexual urges), *Luna defluens* causes impurity, vice, inclination to despoil others through pleasure and delights.

29. One may think of Seneca's diatribes against the misuse of intellect in the *Naturales quaestiones* – esthetic pleasure in service of gluttony (3. 17), science of mirrors exploited in order to increase sexual satisfaction (1. 16), natural sciences and technical ability enslaved to greed and curiosity (5. 18).

30. BOAS and LOVEJOY 1935, I 6, DODDS 1973.

gift of Jupiter. This is a dangerous time, for humans no longer abide by the *instituta*, pay no heed to the claims of piety or to the observance of unwritten, custom laws. Any interchange, in fact any intercourse can be seen as potentially dangerous, as *fides* has gone from this Mercurial, highly unstable world – and while people are hardly *agrestes*, they are also far removed from the benefits of *cultus* that were so important in the intermediate phases of evolution. In a way, men, all the achievements notwithstanding, return to the stage of limited *conuersatio*, of confusion, danger and powerlessness. They may be educated, but truth and order seem to elude them. As *gens humana* drowns in evil (the character of this latter being compatible with the significance of the Moon's association with Mercury as described in 4. 7, particularly with regard to *Luna deficiens*),³¹ the circle is nearly closed – norms cease to shape human behavior and society falls apart. This destructive tendency, particularly fitting in the final period of civilization's history, one may infer, effectively foreshadows the arrival of the end.

Certainly, the image of fulfillment succeeded by swift deterioration conforms to the widely spread belief in the instability of sublunary world or to the commonly held ideas concerning the natural course of human life. Thus, for some ancient writers such as the Athenian poet and politician Solon, the period of maximum intellectual prowess precedes the deterioration of the old age – the same is valid for the ancient political thought, in which the period of maximum power and efficiency precedes fatal downfall due to effects of accumulated wealth and the resulting indolence and luxury.³² For Firmicus, the possible deterioration of intellectual faculties in man's old age, a deterioration necessitated by human biology, transforms itself in another kind of decline, one related to the very mobility and restlessness of intellect, but also to its misuse resulting in rejection of the rules associated with Jupiter, reflected in the unstable and ever changing character of

31. To quote: *faciet malignos, malitiosos, sceleratos, instabiles cupiditatibus, errore dubios, et qui omnia consilia multiplicent et erratica semper dubitatione suspendant, et qui actus suos adsidua commutatione conuertant, et qui res sibi creditas abnegent uel absconsas publicare desiderent, et qui commissa sibi consilia public[ent h]is delationibus deferant, impostores malitiosa semper cupiditate fallentes* etc. (4. 7. 3).

32. For Solon, compare Fr. 27 (23) W. For the idea of the fleeting nature of human excellence or perfection as attested among Roman intellectuals compare e.g. Sallust *Bellum* 41, *Coniurat.* 6; Velleius Paterculus 1. 16.

Mercury.

Striking among the features of this Firmician world is its completeness or exhaustiveness – it appears that at the beginning of Mercury’s reign the humanity has achieved all it could have ever hoped to achieve. Such an outlook would certainly agree with the image known from Manilius’ *Astronomica* Book One, with its emphasis on the achievements of the ancients, or with some intimations of past glory found in Valens’ work – it would be effectively impossible even to repeat the feats of intellectual cognition performed by the legendary astrologers and sages, Nechepso and Petosiris.³³ It would hence appear that no progress is possible in the modern era, that sciences face total stagnation: humankind has already exhausted its cognitive potential. This is an important point, for the notion separates Firmicus from writers such as e.g. Seneca, Pliny the Elder, or Charisius, all of whom tend to stress the constant growth of the data pool.³⁴ For Firmicus, at least in the *Mathesis* 3. 1, knowledge, indeed wisdom, is finite, and can actually reach its limits: having reached these latter at the close of Venus’ reign, it must of necessity begin to fade.

The world of men results flawed, and, even more importantly, doomed – it must decline, and, consequently, it must also die. In this sense, the end, the *apokatastasis*, is providential and, in fact, necessary – destroying the old, it enables a rebirth, a renewal of universal energy, thus allowing for the reestablishment of human culture, which once again proceeds to reach a pinnacle of its achievement. Yet, somewhat strikingly, no actual mention of such a repetition appears in Firmicus – the world (or, rather, his world) ends in cosmic catastrophe: this may be seen as a reminder that ‘our’ history remains limited to single

33. For both Manilius and Valens, the bulk of astrological knowledge came to men through revelation (see Manilius *Astr.* 1. 41-73, Valens *Anth.* 6. 1) – in the past, the perfect sages were capable to actually converse with gods, having a direct access to the secrets of the universe. As a result, there is very little that can be added to that inherited wisdom – one can certainly explain it or improve on its understanding, but there is little doubt that all major truths of astrology are already present in the teaching of the ancients. For Manilius’ concept of progress, compare ROMANO 1979.

34. On this ‘incompleteness’ as indicated by both Pliny (e.g. *NH* 2. 62) and Charisius (*Ars* 1. 15) compare SCHENKEVELD 1998. For a discussion of the Senecan view (with several interesting forays into the realm of Plinian scholarship), compare TUTRONE’s contribution to the present volume.

cosmic cycle, with all others belonging to a different (even if possibly identical) humankind. It may also be, however, that the mention of *apokatastasis* and re-establishment of the universe alone would suffice and suggest to Firmicus' readers the return of reality that is. After all, things do repeat themselves.

The image in question has two features of particular interest when considering the Firmician idea of progress: first, while providing an account of gradual development of man easily reconcilable with the positive theories of progress seen as constant improvement, as growth of knowledge and evolution of arts,³⁵ it stresses the finite character of the effort - with the dawn of the era of Mercury, the intellectual development is concluded; second, in emphasizing the finiteness of the development, it allows for the preference for antiquity: like anyone else, astrologers like to support their doctrines with claims of extreme *vetustas*, claims apparently contradictory (even though coexistent) to the equally widespread and openly manifested ambition to profess one's own originality.³⁶ Astrology as such remains an achievement of the (far superior) past, possibly of Venus' reign, dedicated as it was to the liberal and theoretical pursuits. That creative wisdom (and most certainly astrological lore) stems from the past, is however one of the important elements revealing Firmicus' evaluation of his own era: the quest for knowledge, the intellectual striving for the truth belongs in the past. Yet another revealing point is to be found in his denouncement of the public reality of his times: while not explicitly present in the chapter itself, such a denouncement does figure in the proem to Book Four, where the astrologer explains his decision to distance himself from the world of politics and pursuit of worldly ambitions. It is there that Firmicus mentions astonishing number of vices omnipresent in society: *factiositas*, *improbitas*, *auara cupiditas*, *liuor*, *inuidia*, *improbitas*, and, finally, *perfidia* dominate the world, effectively excluding the possibility of virtue being put to use in public

35. In Firmicus' time such a positive idea was supported e.g. by the already invoked Charisius in his *Ars grammatica* 1. 15 (compare SCHENKEVELD 1998).

36. The tension (studied for more 'scientific' disciplines e.g. by LLOYD 1987, 50-108) is easily detectable in Valens' *Anthologiarum libri* (on the issue compare KOMOROWSKA 2004, 155-182); for Firmicus, the originality consists in providing a comprehensive and accessible manual of planetary astrology (thus *Math.* 2. pr.; 4. pr. 5).

service:

semper enim factiosis hominibus et quos impotentiae delectabat improbitas, uel qui auarae cupiditatis instinctu alienis inhaerebant, uel qui miseris hominibus ex iudiciorum metu terribiles videbantur, erecta constantiae confidentia resistebam. Hinc mihi magnus liuor inuidiae et periculorum procellae improborum hominum prauis cupiditatibus parabantur. Deserui itaque hoc studium, ne imperitorum ac delatorum hominum conualescente consensu pro alienis utilitatibus excumbans maximis me insidiis et maximis periculorum discriminibus implicarem et sq. (4. pr. 1-3)

Trusting in my steadfastness, I had always resisted factitious squabblers and men who found pleasure in violent outrages as well as those who guided by greed threatened property of others or those who sought to terrify the wretches terrorized by mere appearance of a judge. This, however, occasioned deadly envy, and much danger that was born of twisted desires of those dishonest people. Thus did I part from this particular ambition, so that the growing consent of imprudent and treacherous men would not bring me in danger because of possible gains of others.

The picture painted in the passage is overwhelmingly bleak, virtue being practically excluded from the public sphere: clearly, participation in public life endangers one's being; honesty and righteousness disappear as perversion of justice, greed and avarice abound. In fact, this image of mankind consumed by evil ambition and drowning in criminal malice is strikingly resonant of the picture drawn so briefly and yet so convincingly in 3. 1. 14: this, in fact, is the world of perverted social norm and misapplied reason, the world where all the rules can be and are brought into question, the enactment of the madness associated with the transit from the Moon to Mercury. Clearly, we have entered the final phase of human development.

Conclusions

Let us consider the possible effects of such a portrayal for the astrological perception of time: manifestly, the time as we perceive it, is at least at one level linear – the world of men, very much like a single individual, is born, brought to the *akme*, and then suffers the indignity of decline. Yet, this linearity fits into the wider pattern of cyclic rebirth

(the notable exception being that mortal beings are reborn in their descendants, the ability to multiply being frequently understood as the closest approximation of eternal life available to mortal beings).³⁷ Then, and only then, it dies, to be reborn and reborn in a very similar form.³⁸ This grander scheme, which envelops individual finite lives, returning them to a pattern of constant reformation and rebirth, accounts for the cyclic aspect of universal existence. In a way, this is a comforting thought.

Yet, there is another cyclic movement that reminds us of the distant, remote repetitiveness – the decisive changes, indeed shifts in the nature of the human world are occasioned by transits – and these transits, the superimposition of the present movement of the planets onto the original alignment of these latter, remain a constant reminder of the importance of cycles: the planets incessantly circle their orbits, again and again retracing their steps, not yet repeating their original arrangement, but aiming at the celestial *apokatastasis*, promised and foreshadowed in the very cyclicity of their movement. This incessant motion and the periodic return of the phenomena it entails remind us of the hidden ‘great pattern’, of the cycles that would otherwise remain undetectable to human perception, but also engender in our minds that nearly inconceivable and immense concept: ultimate changelessness, perfection of eternal being. The cycle, be it divided in smaller units, be it hidden among the fragments of the reality we perceive, be it hidden in apparent finiteness, remains a reminder of true stability, of immobile perfection. Hence, it is hardly surprising that the celestial regularity, so manifest in spite of the complications intrinsic in the apparently contrary movements of planets and fixed sphere, became so important to Plato,³⁹ and, because of him, to the later philosophy. The importance of the cycle is even more evident for astrologers, for

37. Thus e.g. Aristotle *an.* 415b 2-7 et al., Alexander *de anima* p. 32. 11-15 B., Philoponus *in de anima* pr. 7.11-21 H.

38. Significantly, there are no explicit indications of the nature of the forthcoming world – yet, given the emphasis on the providential nature of world structure or the role played by the creator, we may be inclined in terms of Pseudo-Plutarchean *de fato* 3 (568f-569c), i.e. as a return of the world as we know it, the same events repeating themselves in the established sequence.

39. Compare *Tim.* 36cd; the astronomical interpretation is contained in Proclus *in Tim.* 263.24-265.30.

whom the world is constantly shaped by positions of stellar bodies, positions defined in themselves but also – a maneuver of profound importance when looking at cyclical nature of time – with respect to the original *thema*. The same, significantly, is true of an individual, his fate decided and modified by celestial *periechonta*. Whether we think of ourselves as individuals or as a part of humankind, our life is linked to the planetary and stellar cycles – we abide by their circular movement in every aspect of our existence, the periodic changes of the firmament forming a constant reminder of both the infiniteness of eternity and of our own limitation. Measured by cycles and in turn, measuring cycles,⁴⁰ time, after all, is an image of eternity, the stellar movement being the closest approximation of this latter.⁴¹ It is thus hardly surprising that in contemplating the firmament, ie. in focusing our attention on the stellar movement, we contemplate the nature of the unchangeable one, of the godhead, a point emphasized by Firmicus at the beginning of Book Eight:

Intuere igitur, ..., patentibus oculis caelum, et pulcherrimam istam diuini operis fabricam animus tuus semper aspiciat. Tunc enim mens nostra maiestatis suae recordatione formata, ..., ad auctorem suum festinat nititur gressu... (Math. 8. 1. 6)

Let your eyes fasten on the celestial firmament, so that your spirit feasts on the beautiful structure of this divine creation. It is then that our mind reforms itself reminded of its majesty... thus hastening toward its very creator.

Joanna Komorowska
UKSW, Warszawa
jk.komorowska@gmail.com

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40. The idea is beautifully summarized by Simplicius, in *Phys. IV*, p. 769. 32-33: ὁ δὲ χρόνος κύκλος εἶναι, διότι καὶ μέτρον κυκλοφορίας ἐστὶν αὐτὸς καὶ μετρεῖται ὑπὸ κυκλοφορίας.

41. Compare Plato *Tim.* 37c-38c.

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