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Aby Warburg, Fritz Saxl and the Astrological Ceiling of the Sala di Galatea*

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Recently, while researching an article on the astrological ceiling of the *Sala di Galatea*, I discovered some notes written in Aby Warburg's hand in the margins of his copy of a book rarely cited in the critical literature on the Villa Farnesina: Ernst Maass's *Aus der Farnesina*, published in 1902.¹ What makes these notes particularly interesting is that they demonstrate that Warburg – unbeknownst to Saxl and perhaps even unbeknownst to himself – had successfully recognized the major structural premise of Peruzzi's ceiling.

The ceiling of the *Sala di Galatea* presents one of the most intriguing iconographic problems of Renaissance art. Painted by Baldassare Peruzzi around 1511, it comprises twenty-six frescoed compartments, each of which contains one or more mythologized representations of the planet-gods, zodiacal signs or extra-zodiacal constellations (Plates 1, 2, and 3). The least problematic aspect of the ceiling is the identification of the subject matter of the ten spandrels or *peducci* containing the zodiacal signs and planet-gods.² As

* This paper was written while I was a Frances A. Yates Fellow at the Warburg Institute. I wish to thank the former Director of the Institute, Prof J. B. Trapp, for his continued support of my research. I also wish to thank Prof Sir E. H. Gombrich for his helpful suggestions and criticisms and Miss Anne Marie Meyer for her assistance in deciphering Warburg's handwriting.

1. E. Maass, *Aus der Farnesina. Hellenismus und Renaissance*, Marburg i.H. 1902. Warburg's copy is still held by the Warburg Institute at shelfmark FAF 880. For a much expanded version of the first part of the present essay and for full bibliographical references on the *Sala di Galatea*, see Kristen Lippincott, „Two astrological ceilings reconsidered: The Sala di Galatea in the Villa Farnesina and the Sala del Mappamondo at Caprarola“, in: *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, LIII, 1990, pp. 185-207.
2. They are arranged in a clockwise fashion around the ceiling in the following manner: 1. Aries, Jupiter and Taurus with Europa; 2. Leda and the Swan and the Gemini; 3. Hercules with the Lernean Hydra and Cancer; 4. Hercules with the Nemean Lion (Leo); 5. Virgo and Diana (Luna); 6. Libra and Scorpio with Mars and Mercury; 7. Apollo (Sol) with Sagittarius; 8. Venus and Capricorn; 9. Ganymede (Aquarius) and 10. Venus and Cupid (Pisces) and Saturn.



Plate 1. Rome, Villa Farnesina, *Sala di Galatea*, general view towards the north.

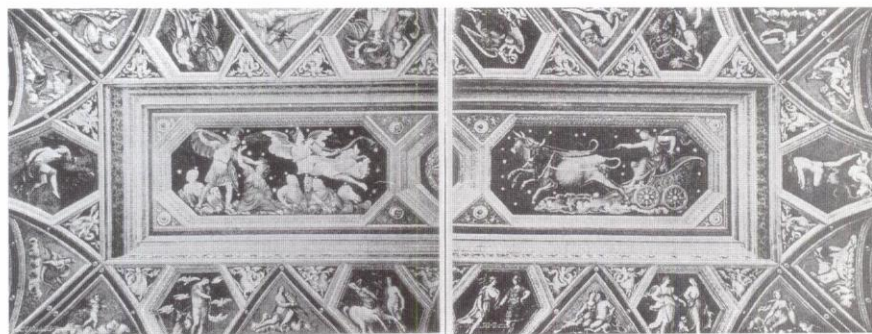


Plate 2. Rome, Villa Farnesina, *Sala di Galatea*, astrological ceiling.

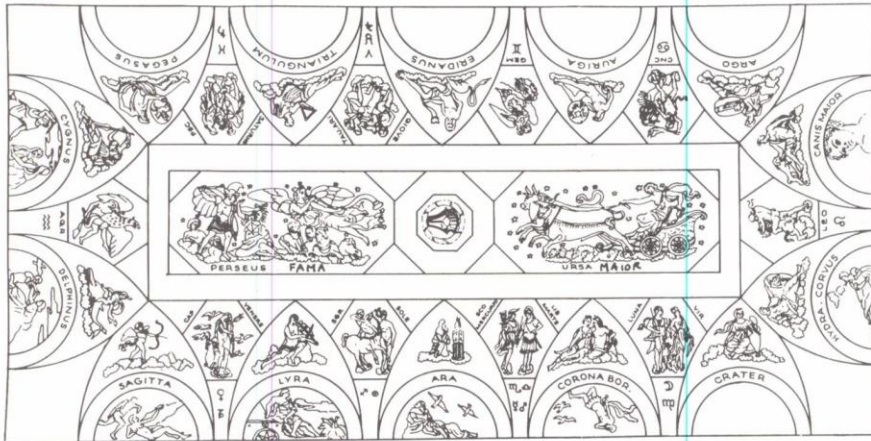


Plate 3. Rome, Villa Farnesina, *Sala di Galatea*, astrological ceiling, schema after Saxl with emendations (Saxl, „La fede di Agostino Chigi“, plate I.).

early as 1912, Warburg had realized that the relationship between planet-gods and zodiacal signs was neither uniform nor haphazard;³ and several years later, in publications from 1920 and 1927, Warburg suggested that the organization of the *Sala di Galatea* ceiling reflected the natal chart of the building's patron, the wealthy Sieneese banker, Agostino Chigi, who, he thought, may have been born in December 1465 while the Sun was transiting Sagittarius.⁴

In 1932 – three years after Warburg's death – Fritz Saxl delivered a lecture in Rome which contained his own findings on the *Sala di Galatea* vault.⁵ Saxl proposed that the arrangement of the planets in the ceiling demonstrated that

3. Amongst the notes he wrote in his copy of Maass's *Aus der Farnesina*, Warburg observed that Saturn was conjunct with Venus; Luna was in Virgo; Venus was in Capricorn or, possibly, in Pisces; Apollo was in Sagittarius; and Jupiter was either in Aries and Taurus. Mars and Mercury were in conjunction with the former in Libra and the latter in Scorpio; the zodiacal panel for Cancer contained a depiction of Engonasin (the constellation *Ophiuchus*) and Aquarius was near Fortuna and Phoenike (or *ursa minor*) [Plate 4].
4. See Aby Warburg, „Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten“, in: *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philos.-hist. Klasse*, XXVI [Abhandlung], 1920 (repr. in: *Warburg GS*, pp. 489-558, esp. 511) and A. Warburg, „Orientalisierende Astrologie, Wissenschaftlicher Bericht über den Deutschen Orientalistentag in Hamburg, 1926“, in: *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, NF VI, 1927 (repr. in: *Warburg GS*, pp. 561-565, esp. 563).
5. See Fritz Saxl, „La fede astrologica di Agostino Chigi“, in: *Collezione La Farnesina. Reale Accademia di Roma*, Rome 1934, pp. 1-57. A. Beer's calculations appear on pp. 61-65. Note esp. the conclusions on p. 65 and 67. Beer republished his findings in A. Beer, „Astronomical Dating of Works of Art“, in: *Vistas in Astronomy*, IX, 1967, pp. 177-223, esp. 189-199.

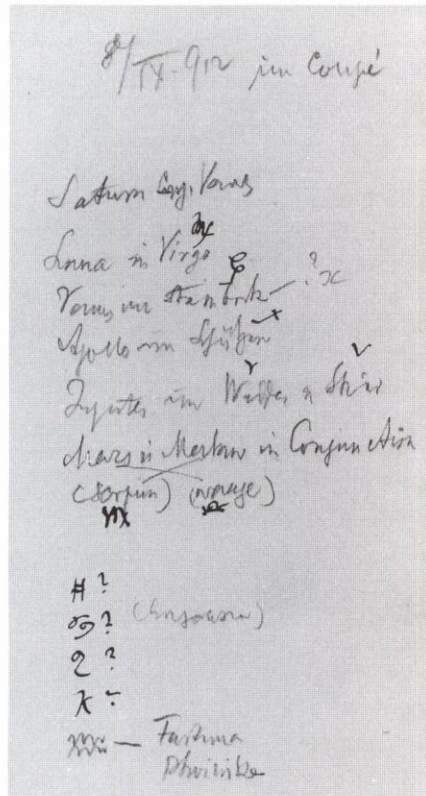


Plate 4. Warburg's notations in Maass's *Aus der Farnesina* (Warburg Institute shelfmark FAF 880).

Agostino Chigi had been born in 1466 between 8 a.m. on 30 November and 11 a.m. on 11 December. A birth-time of 7:00 p.m. on 1 December 1466 was offered as an acceptable mean. Saxl's only allusion to Warburg's previous study was to dismiss the way in which the astronomer whom Warburg had consulted had calculated the breadth of each zodiacal sign.⁶ In the 1934 version of his *Farnesina* lecture, Saxl did not mention Warburg's work at all.⁷

Subsequent research on the *Sala di Galatea* vault has shown that the calculations Saxl had used were also inaccurate and that Chigi most probably had been born on 29 or 30 November.⁸ This suggestion has been confirmed re-

6. Fritz Saxl, „La fede de Agostino Chigi“, p. 29.

7. Fritz Saxl, *Lectures*, London 1957, I, pp. 189-199, esp. 197.

8. W. Hartner, „Qusayr 'Amra, Farnesina, Luther, Hesiod. Some Supplementary Notes to A. Beer's Contribution“, in: *Vistas in Astronomy*, IX, 1967, pp. 225-228, esp. 226-227 and M. Quinlan-McGrath, „The Astrological Vault of the Villa Farnesina. Agostino Chigi's Rising Sign“, in: *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XLVII, 1984, pp. 91-105.

cently by the discovery of Chigi's baptismal record which states that: 'Agostino Andrea son of Mariano Chigi was baptized on the thirtieth day of November 1466 and was born on the twenty-ninth day of the said month at the hour 21 1/2 and Giovanni Salvani was the godfather'.⁹ The discovery of Agostino Chigi's baptismal record should have answered most questions concerning the astrological iconography of Peruzzi's ceiling. If the vault records Chigi's birthdate in a summary way – indicating his birth by means of the location of the planets alone – the baptismal record merely confirms what had already been deduced. But the presence of the extra-zodiacal constellations in the central compartment of the vault and in the fourteen triangular *vele*, however, suggests that Peruzzi intended his vault to convey more than just the zodiacal coordinates of the planets on 29 November 1466. A proper natal chart records a rather specific picture of the relationship between the celestial sphere and a given point on the surface of the earth. Assuming that the *Sala di Galatea* vault is an artistic variation on the theme of Chigi's natal chart, two questions remain unanswered: how has Peruzzi constructed his 'map' of the heavens and to what extent does this 'map' actually reproduce the astronomical coordinates for Siena 'a dì venti-nove di [novembre] a ore ventuno e mezzo'?

In order to answer these questions, we must consider the significance of the fourteen triangular panels or *vele* in the overall *schema* of Chigi's natal chart. The composition of each triangular compartment is relatively consistent. It comprises two parts: a male or female reclining figure and an object. In most cases, the object held by the reclining figure represents an extra-zodiacal constellation and the figures refer to the mythological source from which Peruzzi's designs were adapted: Book II of the *Poetica astronomica* of Hyginus. Only two *vele* do not adhere to this pattern. The first is the scene depicting a male river-god and swan placed between the Aries/Taurus and Gemini panels. The two characters in this compartment are easily identifiable. The swan represents the Ligurian king, who, grieving over the death of his half-brother Phaeton, was transformed into a swan. The river-god is Eridanus, the river into which Phaeton fell. Both figures feature with equal prominence in the versions of the Phaeton fable told by Hyginus and Ovid.¹⁰ The problem in trying to identify the subject of this *vela* is deciding which figure can claim prominence. Does this image represent the constellation *cygnus* or *Eridanus*?

9. Siena, Archivio di Stato, Pieve di San Giovanni 2, fol. 69r: „Agostino Andrea di Mariano Chigi si batezo a dì 30 di novembre 1466 e naque a dì 29 di deto mese a ore 21 1/2 e fu conpare Giovanni Salvani“. See I. D. Rowland, „The Birth Date of Agostino Chigi - Documentary Proof“, in: *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XLVII, 1984, pp. 192-193.

10. Hyginus, *Fabulae*, cliv and Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 367-380.

The second problematic *vela* contains the female figure with windblown hair which appears next to Aquarius on the end wall of the *Sala di Galatea* (Plate 5). Warburg seems to have been the first scholar to recognize the identity of this figure as 'Fortuna'. In his copy of Maass's *Aus der Farnesina*, he questioned the author's suggestion that this figure was related to Jupiter and underlined the phrase '*nach vorn*' (referring to the figure's hair), writing '*kl[assische] Fortuna*' in the margin (Plate 6).¹¹ But does this figure also represent a constellation? Hyginus offers the story of Nemesis – a Greek counterpart to the Roman *Fors Fortuna* – as his fable for *cygnus*, the swan.¹² Jupiter, disguised as a swan, lay with the sleeping Nemesis, who later bore an egg which Mercury carried off to Sparta and placed in the lap of the unsuspecting Leda. The egg yielded Helen, later 'of Troy'. It seems likely, therefore, that the figure of 'Fortuna' represents the constellation *cygnus*; and that the *vela* with the swan and river-god represents the constellation *Eridanus*.

There have been three main interpretations of the overall structure of the *Sala di Galatea* vault, each of which seems equally plausible when set within its own self-imposed limits. In 1880, Förster argued that the extra-zodiacal constellations were neatly divided into two groups of northern and southern constellations and he suggested that the constellations were thus arranged to follow the geographical coordinates of the *Sala di Galatea* itself.¹³ Unfortunately, this *schema* does not work. The northern constellations in the *Sala di Galatea* actually form an arc around the south-eastern end of the ceiling, and the six southern constellation groups are clustered around the north-western end (Plate 7).

Saxl suggested that the arrangement of the extra-zodiacal constellations in the *Sala di Galatea* was not based on any sort of observation of the real sky, but that it was adapted from a celestial planisphere (Plate 8).¹⁴ Essentially, each extra-zodiacal constellation in the vault was placed near the zodiacal constellation with which it shared longitudinal boundaries.

Finally, in 1984, Quinlan-McGrath proposed that the extra-zodiacal constellations in the ceiling recorded the specific constellations found rising and setting along the edge of the horizon at the moment of Agostino Chigi's birth.¹⁵ According to Quinlan-McGrath, all the constellations depicted in the ceiling – save one – are either rising or setting along the horizon while the zodiacal sign of Virgo is rising on the eastern horizon of the sky. Therefore, she argued,

11. The note appears on p. 41.

12. Hyginus, *Astronomica*, II, 8.

13. R. Förster, *Farnesina-Studien. Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach dem Verhältnis der Renaissance zur Antike*, Rostock 1880, pp. 43-44.

14. Fritz Saxl, „La fede di Agostino Chigi“, p. 22.

15. Quinlan-McGrath, „The Astrological Vault of the Villa Farnesina“, pp. 96-97.



Plate 5. Rome, Villa Farnesina, *Sala di Galatea*, astrological ceiling, detail Fortuna/cygnus.

the sign of Virgo was Agostino Chigi's rising sign or Ascendant. The main problem with Quinlan-McGrath's thesis, as she herself acknowledges, is the fact that Virgo was not the Ascendant at the time she has chosen for Chigi's birth, 9:30 p.m. on 29 November 1466.¹⁶ Leo was. And, unfortunately, none of the explanations she offers to 'cover over' this discrepancy are very convincing.

There is, however, another possible reading of the *Sala di Galatea* vault. When interpreting Agostino Chigi's baptismal record, most scholars have assumed that a practicing astronomer played some role in the notation. More probably it was Agostino's father, Mariano Chigi, who noted the time of birth. His calculations would have been made in accordance with local Siennese tradition and the 'ore ventuno e mezzo' would have been calculated from sunset of the previous day.¹⁷ In Siena, the 24-hour day began at twilight (one half-hour after sunset) with the ringing of the 'ventiquattro' bell, which marked the end

16. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

17. This suggestion was first made in an unpublished paper by K. Weil-Garris Brandt and J. Casanovas entitled *An astronomical reconsideration of Agostino Chigi's horoscope on Peruzzi's Farnesina Ceiling*. I warmly thank Prof Brandt for allowing me to read and cite her article. Similar conclusions also appear in J. Cox-Rearick, *Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art: Pontormo, Leo X, and the Two Cosimos*, Princeton 1984, pp. 192-194.

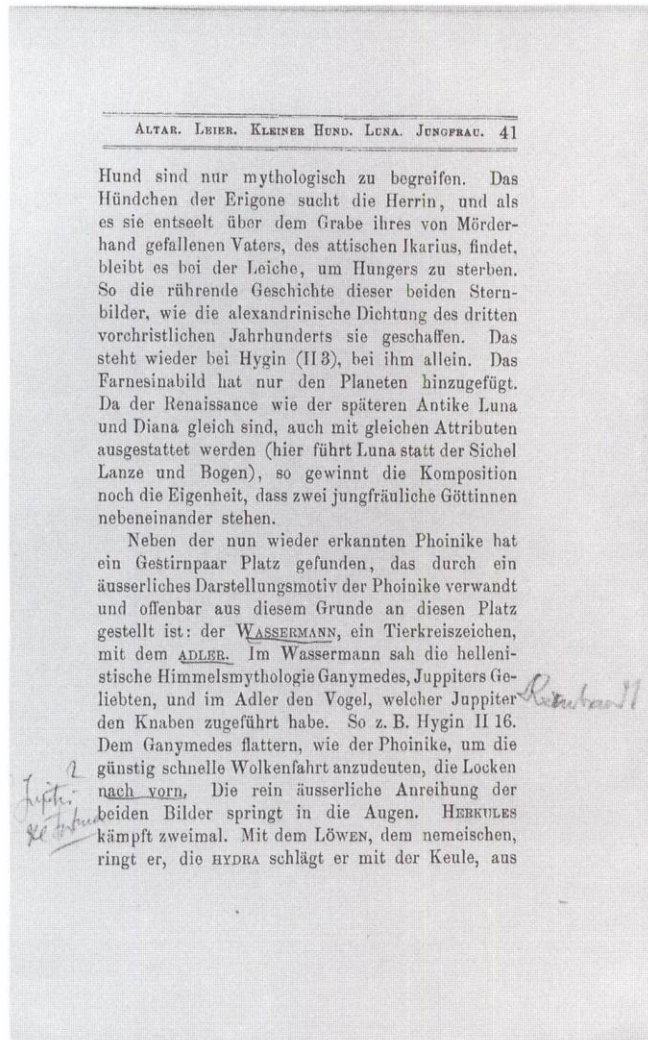


Plate 6. Warburg's notations in Maass's *Aus der Farnesina*, p. 41 (Warburg Institute shelfmark FAF 880).

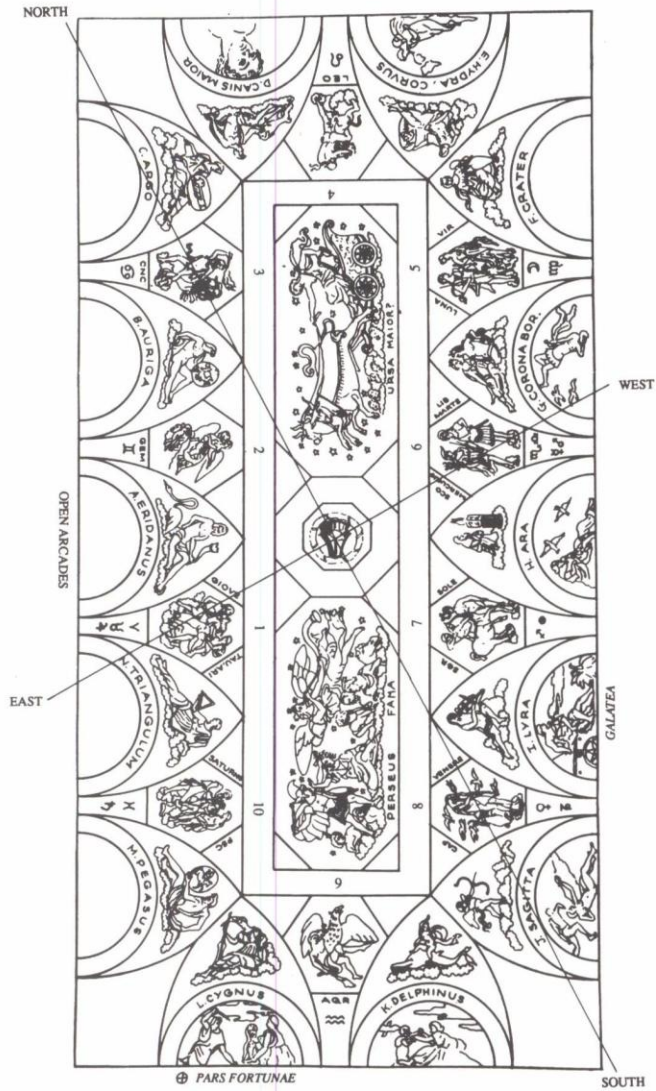


Plate 7. Rome, Villa Farnesina, Sala di Galatea, plan with geographical coordinates.

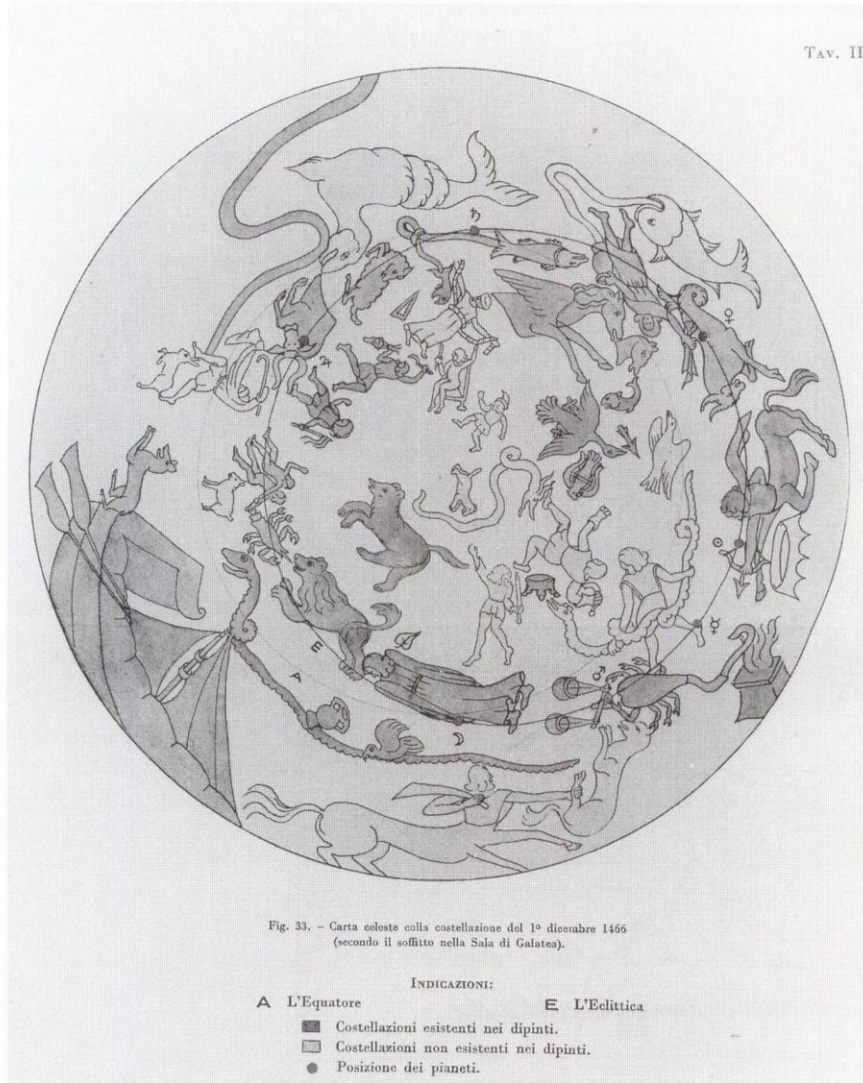


Fig. 33. - Carta celeste colla costellazione del 1° dicembre 1466 (secondo il soffitto nella Sala di Galatea).

Plate 8. Celestial planisphere transposed from A. Beer's drawings after the astronomical vault at Qusayr 'Amra showing Saxl's coordinates for Chigi's natal chart (from Saxl, „La fede di Agostino Chigi“, plate II).

of Complin.¹⁸ The hour at which the 'ventiquattro' was rung was only superficially astronomical. Rather than calculating the moment of sunset for each evening, the church set up a schedule by which the clock was 'reset' every ten days. In the early eighteenth-century, for example, on 21 November the 'ventiquattro' rang at 5:31 p.m. It remained set at that time until 1 December, when it was changed to 5:22 p.m.¹⁹ Since the birth-time recorded in Agostino Chigi's baptismal record was probably calculated according to a similar sort of schedule, its 'astronomical accuracy' is somewhat relative. The 'ore ventuno e mezzo' would not have been counted from the actual sunset of 28 November, but following the official 'ventiquattro-schedule' then in use. As a result, until the appropriate fifteenth-century 'ventiquattro-schedule' is discovered, all that one can say with certainty is that Agostino Chigi was born sometime around 3:00 p.m. on 29 November – in which case, his Ascendant would have been in the middle of Taurus.²⁰

If one calculates a horoscopic chart for Chigi incorporating this new information and sets it against the decoration of the *Sala di Galatea* the correlation between the two pictures is strikingly apparent (Plate 9). Taking Chigi's Ascendant in Taurus as the fixed point of 'East' in both the chart and the ceiling, one finds that the actual, geographical east/west coordinates of the *Sala di Galatea* match the line of Chigi's horizon. His Mid-heaven falls at the end of Capricorn and the beginning of Aquarius, and his *Imum coeli* at the end of Cancer and beginning of Leo. This line corresponds to the geographical north/south axis of the *Sala di Galatea*. Förster's feeling that the different ends of the room signified opposite ends of the sky was not far wrong. The Aquarius end of the ceiling does represent the 'top' of the natal chart; and the Leo coincides with the 'bottom'.

18. For further information about the ringing of the Angelus bell, see „Angelus Bell“, in: *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York 1913, I, pp. 487-488. I thank Elizabeth Teviotdale for this reference.

19. See N. Barbieri, „Note di cronologia: le ore a Siena dal XIV al XVIII secolo“, in: *Bullettino senese di storia patria*, XC, 1984, pp. 148-151. I thank Prof Nicolai Rubinstein for this reference.

20. My rough calculations for 3:01 p.m. at 43° N and 11.2° E and using a Tropical zodiac yield an Ascendant of 17° 56' Taurus. Happily this figure falls within the range of Ascendants proposed by scholars who chose to calculate either from sunset or the beginning of twilight. Brandt first suggested a Taurean Ascendant in K. Weil-Garris Brandt, „Cosmological Patterns in Raphael's Chigi Chapel in S. Maria del Popolo“, in: *Raffaello a Roma. Il convegno del 1983*, Rome 1986, pp. 127-158, esp. 132. Brandt and Casanovas offered an Ascendant of 12° Taurus figuring a birthtime equivalent with the modern Italian local-time of 2:40 p.m.; Cox-Rearick calculated Chigi's birth-time as 3:08 p.m., but believed his chart was rectified for the Farnesina vault to about 3:15 p.m. (Cox-Rearick, *Dynasty and Destiny*, p. 193, n. 46).

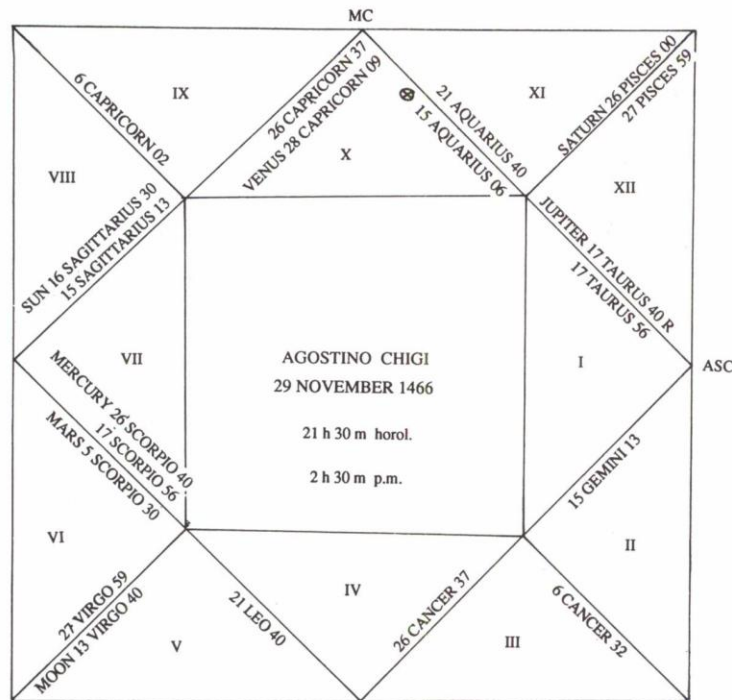


Plate 9. Horoscope of Agostino Chigi, reversed.

Warburg, however, was slightly closer. In the jottings in the back of his copy of Maass's *Aus der Farnesina*, Warburg reconstructed his impression of the *Galatea* vault as a natal chart with Taurus at the Ascendant and Aquarius at Mid-heaven (Plate 10). For all intents and purposes, it matches Chigi's natal chart exactly.

Warburg made another note which escaped his followers. One astrologically important point in a Renaissance horoscopic chart is the *Pars fortunae*, or the Part of Fortune. This point is used by astrologers as an indication of benefic power. Ptolemy states that, along with the Sun, Moon and Ascendant, the Part of Fortune is one of the four 'great authorities' of the natal chart.²¹ It was generally associated with inherited wealth and good fortune. Chigi's Part of Fortune falls within the zodiacal sign of Aquarius. As we have seen, Warburg had noted that the goddess 'Fortuna' was placed next to Aquarius in Peruzzi's

21. Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* III, pp. 128-129. See also A. Bouché-LeClercq, *L'astrologie grecque*, Paris 1899, pp. 289-296.

56 III. GESCHICHTLICHE BEDEUTUNG DER FRESKEN.

Wissenschaft ist sie zeitlos. Zeitlos sind die Werke in der Farnesina, nicht beschränkt auf Künstler oder Humanisten der Kreis, an welchen sie sich richten: es ist die Menschheit als solche, wie sie im Wandel der Jahrhunderte trotz allen Fortschreitens im inneren Grunde dieselbe bleibt. Die geoffenbarte Schönheit selbst, wirkt diese Schöpfung auf Auge und Herz mit allen ihren Stärken, frei von jeder Zeitgewalt, herrlich wie am ersten Tag. Sie wiederzusehn ist das Sehnen und die Hoffnung unseres Lebens.

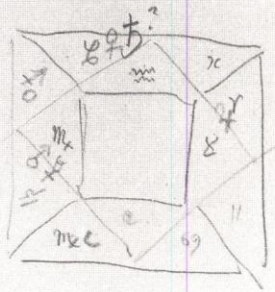


Plate 10. Warburg's notations in Maass's *Aus der Farnesina*, p. 56 (Warburg Institute shelfmark FAF 880).

vault. It seems likely, then, that 'Fortuna' appears here as an indication of Chigi's own *Pars fortunae*.

Finally, if Chigi's Ascendant is Taurus – as one suspects – this might explain why the figure of *Perseus* features so prominently in the *Sala di Galatea* vault (Plate 11 and 12). In both medieval and Renaissance astrological sources, the constellation of *Perseus* is listed as a *paranatellonton* of Taurus. It rises when Taurus rises and sets when Taurus sets. If Chigi was born with an Ascendant in Taurus, he may have considered the constellation of *Perseus* an important part of his personal iconography. It was his personal constellation, so to speak.

At this point, one may return to the issue of Warburg's notes on the *Sala di Galatea*. From the annotations on the frontispiece, we know that Warburg bought Maass's book in 1908 (Plate 13).²² He didn't read it, however, until

22. The note reads: '08/214' indicating that it was the 214th book that Warburg bought in 1908. The corresponding entry in Warburg's ledger informs us that he paid DM 1.20 for the book. I thank John Perkins for his assistance in tracing this information.

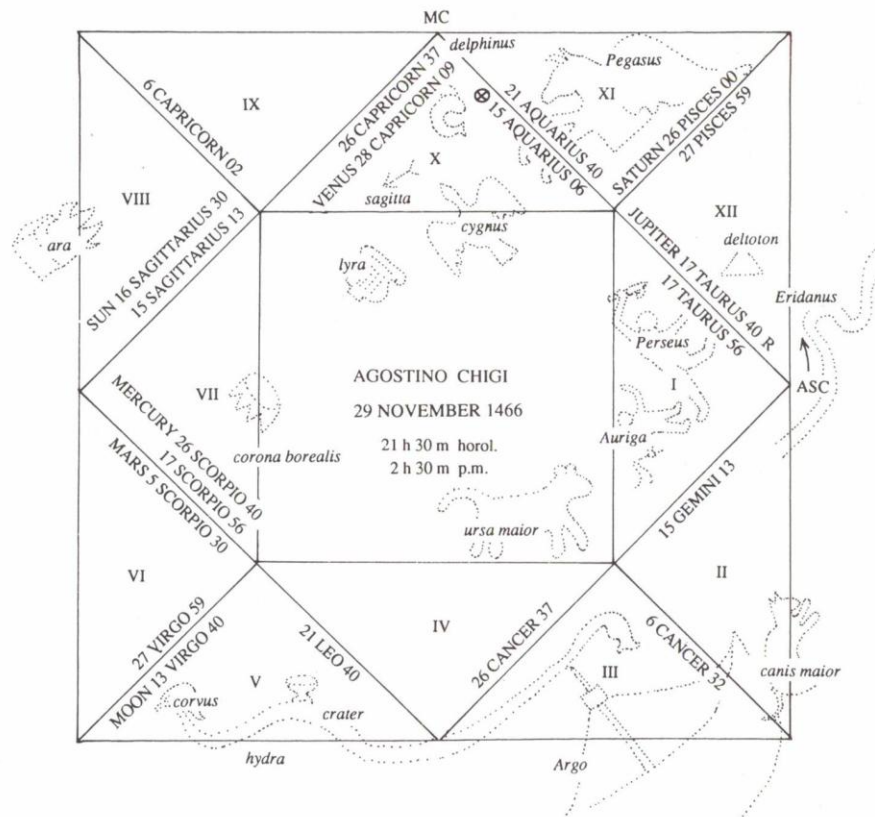


Plate 11. Horoscope of Agostino Chigi, reversed, and superimposed on a planispheric map.



Plate 12. Rome, Villa Farnesina, Sala di Galatea, astrological ceiling, detail Perseus with Fama.

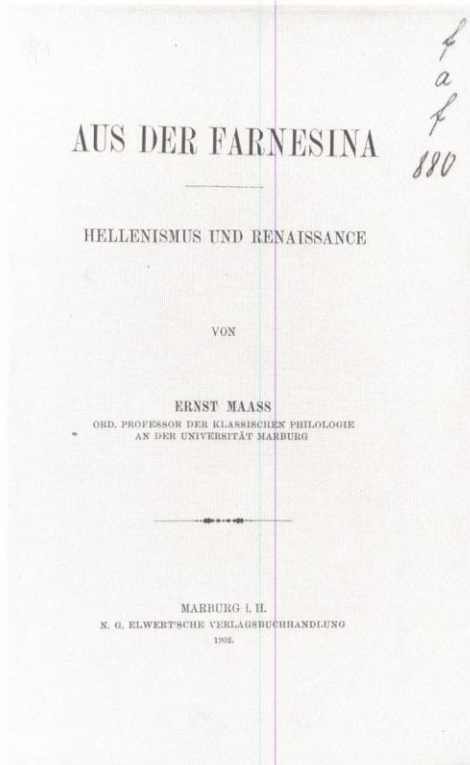


Plate 13. Titlepage of Warburg's copy of Maass's *Aus der Farnesina* (Warburg Institute shelfmark FAF 880).

September 8th, 1912.²³ This information not only coincides with Saxl's characterization of Warburg when the two first met in the late autumn of 1911 as 'hardly familiar' with the content of the numerous astrology books in his possession;²⁴ it also tells us within which context Warburg read Maass's book.

Since 1909, Warburg had been working on a number of problems generated by the iconography of the Palazzo Schifanoia.²⁵ Indeed, he may have even read Maass's book as he was travelling on the train down to Rome to deliver his lecture on the *Salone dei Mesi* before the Tenth Annual Congress of Art Historians in October of that year.²⁶ As his later allusions to the *Sala di Galatea*

23. Note the heading of Warburg's annotations: '8/IX.[1]912 im Coupé' [Plate 4].

24. See Fritz Saxl, „The History of Warburg's Library“ in: *Gombrich WBG 1970*, pp. 325-338, esp. 327.

25. Aby Warburg, „Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoia zu Ferrara“, in: *L'Italia e l'arte straniera. Atti del X Congresso internazionale di Storia dell'Arte*, Rome 1922, pp. 179-193. Repr. *Warburg GS*, II, pp. 459-481. See also *Gombrich WBG 1970*, pp. 191-199.

26. This possibility was suggested to me by Anne Marie Meyer.

suggest, the decoration of the room interested Warburg primarily for three reasons. First, the ceiling provided him with an example of 'Perseus regained'. An integral part of Warburg's lecture on the Ferrarese frescoes centred on the figure of the first decan of Aries, in whom Warburg saw the first glimmerings of the High Renaissance (Plate 14). He believed that this decan-god was a much-mutilated, but triumphant recollection – an engram (as he would later term the phenomenon) – of the classical hero, Perseus (Plate 15). As such, the figure demonstrated the penultimate step in the resuscitation of the gods of Greece and symbolized, as Gombrich has suggested, the potential for triumph over dehumanization by irrational fears.²⁷ The *Perseus* in the *Sala di Galatea* was evidence, as it were, of the way in which a superior civilization could hold the demoniacal face of superstition in check. Second, the presence of pagan deities – astral demons – in a cycle connected with the circle of Raphael provided Warburg with a perfect example with which to argue his thesis of conciliation: his belief that it was the 'state of balance itself that represents the highest human value' and that a 'psychology of compromise' underlies the greatest moments of civilization.²⁸ Finally, Warburg spotted the figure of *Fortuna* in the *Sala di Galatea* (Plate 4). She too symbolized a conciliation of opposites; a key by which the modern scholar might better understand how Renaissance man could reconcile in his own mind the apparent conflict between Christian belief and intellectual yearnings toward the art, literature and ideals of pagan antiquity. As a result of his previous research on the late fifteenth-century Florentine merchants, Sassetti and Rucellai, Warburg saw this figure of *Fortuna* as a kind of benign totem – a sort of talisman that helped Renaissance man bridge the uncertain gap between predetermination and free will.²⁹

For Warburg, then, the iconography of *Sala di Galatea* vault was not so much a problem to be solved as a cache of details, each of which must be explored in order to see how it can be made to fit into the greater mechanism of his own thoughts and theories. The discovery that the ceiling represented a horoscope was more important for Warburg than uncovering the exact date it depicted. The former had a use, the latter was mere fact.

Saxl, although greatly influenced by Warburg's vision, possessed an altogether different sort of scholarly temperament (Plate 16). In Bing's words, he was happiest when he was steeped in 'the massive, anonymous record of material on which others might afterwards exercise their wits... the small precise

27. Gombrich *WBG* 1970, p. 260.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

29. Aby Warburg, „Francesco Sassetti's letztwillige Verfügung“, in: *Kunstwissenschaftliche Beiträge August Schmarsow gewidmet*, Leipzig 1907, pp. 129-152. Repr. Warburg *GS*, I, pp. 127-158. See also Gombrich *WBG* 1970, p. 173.



Plate 14.

Plate 14. Ferrara, Palazzo Schifanoia, *Salone dei Mesi*, detail of the first decan of Aries.



Plate 15.

Plate 15. Leiden, Universitätsbibliothek, Voss. lat Q. 79, fol. 40^r, *Perseus*.



Plate 16. Fritz Saxl on holiday in the Austrian Alps.

detail which is not open to doubt'.³⁰ He mistrusted the philosophical and recoiled from the well-informed guess.³¹ For him, the exact time of Chigi's birth was a paramount concern. As far as Saxl was concerned, the fact that Warburg had got the date wrong nullified his insights. With damning precision, he records: '*ma il calcolo... non condusse alla conferma che il Warburg aveva intuito*'.³² One feels even that Warburg's earlier lament that he would be remembered by history only as the man who could 'churn up facts that had not been known before... [like] the services of a pig in rooting up truffles' might have met with a certain degree of hard-edged skepticism from Saxl.³³

It is only this fundamental difference in temperament that could account for why two men who worked side-by-side for years on exactly the same problems did not realize that one held a key for which the other was searching. One must question Bing's claim that their common interest in astrology formed a *synaestria* between Warburg and Saxl.³⁴ There may have been a deep bond between the two men, but it does not seem to have been an intellectual bond, nor does the meeting point seem to be their common interest in astrology.

Warburg and Saxl shared three fundamental traits in common. First, they both saw academic research as a vocation. Work, for both, was paramount. Furthermore, both men seem to have possessed a certain personal magnetism, radiating no doubt from this conviction that the tasks in which they were engaged were related to a higher plane of existence. Warburg's vision was tremendously compelling. It was the force of this vision which drove Saxl to abandon his early research on Rembrandt; a decision which, as Bing notes, Saxl always recalled with some bitterness.³⁵ Indeed, Saxl seems to have always been somewhat ambivalent about Warburg's personal vision of art and art history. No doubt this ambivalence extended to his personal relations with Warburg as well. This may help to explain why, after Warburg's 1924 return to Hamburg, the two men were seldom found together in the same country, let alone the same Library. One should appreciate how difficult it must have been for Saxl when the burden of sustaining Warburg's Library fell upon his shoulders.

30. Gertrud Bing, 'Fritz Saxl (1890-1948): A memoir' in Fritz Saxl 1890-1948, in: *A Volume of Memorial Essays from his Friends in England*, ed. by D. J. Gordon, London 1957, pp. 1-46, esp. 14.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

32. Fritz Saxl, 'La fede di Agostino Chigi', p. 29.

33. Quoted from Warburg's Diary, 8 April 1907: '... zum Herausbuddeln der bisher unbekannteren Einzeltatsachen ... Trüffelschweindienste'. Passage and English translation taken from *Gombrich WBG 1970*, p. 140.

34. Gertrud Bing, 'Fritz Saxl', p. 6.

35. Gertrud Bing, 'Fritz Saxl', p. 7.

It was a legacy which he could not – and thank goodness did not – refuse. But it seems fairly certain that it was a legacy that he never would have chosen for himself.

At the same time, however, Saxl himself was extremely strong-willed regarding the careers and interests of his students and colleagues. There are numerous stories about Saxl in which he appears as both the hero and the villain persuading hapless young research assistants to spend their life researching topics in which they later claimed to have had absolutely no interest. By all accounts, Saxl was a tremendously charming and generous man. But he was also very keen to ensure that the scholarly pursuits of readers in the Warburg Institute were aligned with what he saw as the Institute's mission. One story has Saxl pouncing on a young colleague who was standing reading in the stacks and asking 'Why are you reading this book?'³⁶ Saxl says of Warburg: 'Warburg educated his pupils and successors to an absolute and unconditional submission of their whole existence to the demands of scholarship';³⁷ and Bing says of Saxl: 'the result [of Saxl's attention] was a positive gain to those who submitted themselves to his influence'.³⁸ The sentiments are similar, but the difference in emphasis is important to remember.

The true bond between Warburg and Saxl was their shared sense of responsibility towards the discipline of art history. Both men felt it their duty to free the study of art from simple connoisseurship – to legitimize the status of art history as a fully accepted branch of human learning. As Warburg puts it: 'We of the younger generation want to attempt to advance the science of art so far that anyone who talks in public about art without having specially and profoundly studied the science should be considered just as ridiculous as people who dare to talk about medicine without being doctors....'³⁹ Above all, both men despised the dilettante.

Much is written these days about the success or failings of the 'Warburg school' without any comprehension of who Warburg was, what he believed or what he wrote. I would conclude by suggesting two points: first, that the idea of a 'Warburg school' is a misconception. The brood of iconographers

36. Anecdote related by Prof Gombrich, in conversation (June 1990).

37. Fritz Saxl, 'The History of Warburg's Library', in: *Gombrich WBG 1970*, p. 335.

38. Gertrud Bing, 'Fritz Saxl', p. 43.

39. Quoted from Warburg's Diary, 3 August 1888 'Wir junge Generation von Kunstforschern wollen die Kunstwissenschaft so weit zu bringen versuchen, dass der, der über Kunst öffentlich redet, ohne sich eigens in sie vertieft zu haben, als ebenso lächerlich gelten soll wie Leute, die sich über Medizin zu reden getrauen, ohne Doctoren zu sein...' Passage and English translation from *Gombrich WBG 1970*, p. 40.

attached to the Warburg Institute were Saxl's children, not Warburg's.⁴⁰ Second, due to this fixation on the idea of a 'Warburg school', modern art historians have failed to appreciate the extent to which Warburg himself possessed a tremendous visual memory and a virtually unparalleled ability to recognize essential patterns in works of art. This is not the study of 'iconography' which we have inherited; it is a simple talent for being able to look at paintings and see how they are put together.

One of the main reasons why there was no 'Warburg school' is because these sorts of gifts cannot be reduced to formulae. Moreover, as I hope has been shown, such gifts cannot be passed on – even by osmosis – to an unwilling colleague. The Warburg Institute in London has been very lucky to inherit Warburg's books; but it remains to be seen if we will ever be able to appreciate the true wealth of Warburg's Library.

40. Gertrud Bing, to a certain extent, makes this point in her memoir of Saxl: '... „Warburgian studies“ (the term being now taken to represent the achievements of a group of scholars rather than those of the person whose name served them as a descriptive label) ...', G. Bing, „Fritz Saxl“, p. 28.