Renaissance and Early Modern Science

Fabrizio Bònoli, Giuseppe Bezza, Salvo De Meis, Cinzia Colavita (eds.)
I Pronostici di Domenico Maria da Novara, "Biblioteca di Nuncius: Studi e Testi LXIX". Firenze: Olschki, 2012. viii + 317 pp. ill., ISBN 978-88-222-62165.

Domenico Maria da Novara is one of the most celebrated personalities of early Renaissance astronomy. Might we expect anything else? While he taught at the university of Bologna, one of his students was no less than Nicholas Copernicus.

The great merit of this book is two-fold. Firstly, it deprives da Novara of the legendary aura generated by his association with Copernicus. Secondly, it casts a new light on da Novara's astronomical/astrological activity by providing the first modern transcription of his surviving *Prognostications*. This remarkable result was obtained thanks to the collaboration of four scholars.

Fabrizio Bònoli's introduction removes all of the spurious information about da Novara's life. As odd as it may appear, the biography of da Novara occupies only a few lines. He was born in Ferrara on July 29th (or August 1st), 1454; he finished his studies "in arts and medicine" at the university of Ferrara on June 28th, 1484; he taught at the university of Bologna from 1484 to 1504, where each year he wrote two versions of his *Prognostications* (Italian and Latin) and a few other lost works; he neither married nor had sons; he died in 1504. Other biographical details are the result of second hand sources or mere speculations. Of course Bònoli does not limit himself to such a synthetic biography. He depicts the scholarly environment of Bologna and its uneven relationship with the Ptolemaic tradition. This reconstruction is indispensable in explaining some of the original aspects of da Novara's astronomy: the theory of the alleged motion of the Earth's poles, the theory of Lunar motion, the study of the variation of the obliquity of the ecliptic, and the construction of large observational instruments.

The other two introductions by Giuseppe Bezza and Salvo De Meis, deal respectively with da Novara's astrological doctrine and the accuracy of the astronomical data of the *Prognostications*. Bezza thoroughly places da Novara's doctrine within the Medieval astrological tradition. He emphasizes the reliance of European astrologers on the theories elaborated by Arabic/Islamic authors, more than on those expounded in Claudius Ptolemy's *Quadripartitum*. In particular, the doctrine of the great planetary conjunctions – involving Saturn, Jupiter and Mars – was preferred to the Ptolemaic evaluation of Solar and Lunar eclipses. Da Novara was, however, not dogmatic, especially about a third phenomenon useful for divination: the entry of the Sun in the sign of Aries. Initially in agreement with the Arabic/Islamic authors, da Novara became aware of the

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observational limitations that prevented the reliable timing of the entry. Such limitations may also explain why, on the one hand, he partially recovered the Ptolemaic doctrine of the eclipses and yet, on the other hand, he built large instruments to increase observational accuracy.

De Meis's astronomical analysis appears as a recollection of personal notes transferred into the book as they were taken. As reader unfriendly such an editorial choice may be, a few noteworthy facts emerge from the comparisons between the data of da Novara's *Prognostications*, those of the astronomical tables available at the end of the 15th century (the ephemerides of Regiomontanus and the Alphonsine Tables), and those reconstructed via present astronomy. De Meis demonstrates that, despite significant errors on single data, da Novara's calculations were not copied from other sources. This fact confirms that da Novara was note a faker, as many astrologers of his time, but a valuable mathematician.

Aside from the three introductions, the most important part of the book contains the transcription of 32 *Prognostications* over about 40 that da Novara wrote in agreement to his contract with the university of Bologna. The recollection of this very rare material, and especially the finding of 23 additional *Prognostications* to the nine which were already known, places invaluable textual material into the hands of the historians of astronomy. It is very important to note that Bònoli and Cinzia Colavita prepared a transcription, not a critical edition. The random check on the originals (especially the Latin ones) reveals that the transcription is only partly reliable. The Latin abbreviations of the originals are carefully resolved but a few occasional misspellings occur. Although this problem does not prevent the general understanding of the *Prognostications*, which was in fact the main purpose of the four editors, it also highlights the urgent need for a critical edition of da Novara's existent works.

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