

DEMONS OF TIME: TRITHEMIUS AND HISTORY AS FORECASTING*

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Abstract

Abbot Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516) developed a distinctive esoteric theory of history that combined astrology and magic as tools for interpreting the past and anticipating future events. His most comprehensive work on the subject, entitled *De septem secundeis* (1508), outlines a theoretical system for computing world history from Creation to the year 1525. According to Trithemius, history progresses in cycles of 354 lunar years, each governed by one of seven angelic intelligences, or planetary spirits, whose regency shapes the character and direction of earthly happenings. While building on cryptographic ideas first introduced in his earlier *Steganographia*, the philosophical scope of *De septem secundeis* broadens considerably, drawing on medieval sources such as Albumasar, Albertus Magnus and Peter of Abano. Following his esoteric assumptions, Trithemius presents astrology, theology, and prophecy as interconnected methods for discerning divine will as it unfolds through history. Through this framework, the abbot engages major sixteenth-century debates on astrological determinism, human free will, religious reform, and eschatology, offering a philosophical response grounded in a vision of history as a divinely structured and intelligible order.

Key Words

Magic; History; Astrology; Religion; Prophecy



* The origins of this essay trace back to the autumn of 2021, when I undertook a research project at the Forschungszentrum Gotha of the University of Erfurt. During this period, I was granted the privilege of consulting several rare editions of Trithemian works preserved in the distinguished collections of the research library. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Martin Mulsow, Director of the Institute, as well as to his esteemed colleagues and the dedicated staff of the library, whose support was instrumental in facilitating my work. The term ‘demon’ in the title is employed in its etymological sense, deriving from the Greek δαίμων (daimōn), which refers to a divine or semi-divine power, spirit, intelligence, or intermediary force rather than an inherently malevolent entity. Throughout the article, demons are distinguished from angels according to context and religious traditions in order to avoid ambiguity.

« I wonder », said he, « that a soothsayer doesn't
laugh when he sees another soothsayer. »

M. T. Cicero, *De divinatione*, II, 51

I. Introduction: Magic and History

An in-depth examination of the intellectual journey of Johannes von Heidenberg, better known as Abbot Trithemius (1462–1516), has been conducted by scholars, who have traced his most significant theoretical achievements. The study of the numerous writings of the Benedictine monk, who was a pupil of Konrad Celtis, Jakob Wimpfeling and Johannes Reuchlin, has illuminated Trithemius's legacy in a number of different areas. This includes his contributions as a humanist, theologian, and polymath, as well as his activities as a cryptographer, alchemist, and magician, occurring just prior to the onset of the Protestant Reformation. The meticulous tracing of Trithemius's biography has enabled scholars to direct their focus towards the diplomatic and political context in which his philosophical project was articulated. The complex relationship between Trithemius and the influential figures of his time, including Emperor Maximilian I of Habsburg, Margrave Joachim of Brandenburg, and Count Johannes von Westenburg, has also been a subject of much historical interest in order to understand how, in response to the theoretical concerns of his patrons, Trithemius developed the concept of reviving the occult sciences as a broader cultural program.¹

Further scholarly research has led to a more accurate portrayal of the notorious 'Black Abbot', in line with his documented historical behaviour. In addition to his contributions to the Bursfelde Congregation and the expansion of the monastic libraries at the abbeys of Sponheim and Würzburg, Trithemius demonstrated an enduring passion for historical writing coupled with an unwavering dedication to occult wisdom. In the former, he displayed particular expertise in chronography, hagiography, ecclesiastical chronicles, and imperial genealogies; in the latter, he channeled his occult inclinations into the establishment of an esoteric philosophy that sought to counteract magical practices condemned by the Church, such as witchcraft. In the light of the new evidence, the portrait of Trithemius has been freed from the prejudices that accompanied his work, which was discredited over the centuries by accusations of fraud. The discredit he suffered was mainly the

¹ See KLAUS ARNOLD, *Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516)*, Kommissionsverlag Ferdinand Schöningh, Würzburg 1971; NOEL L. BRANN, *The Abbot Trithemius (1462-1516). The Renaissance of Monastic Humanism*, Brill, Leiden 1981; ID., *Trithemius and Magical Theology. A Chapter in the Controversy over Occult Studies in Early Modern Europe*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1999; IOAN P. CULIANU, *Eros et magie à la Renaissance. 1484*, Flammarion, Paris 1984; PAOLA ZABELLI, *White Magic, Black Magic in the European Renaissance*, Brill, Leiden 2007.

result of his reputation as a follower of necromancy and a practitioner of historical falsification, despite his protestations to the contrary.²

Nevertheless, a pivotal aspect of Trithemius's intellectual legacy remains underexplored and poorly understood by scholars: namely, the connection he established between magic and history, utilizing astrology as a methodology for interpreting the sequence of events in time. The combination of astrology and historiography served to elaborate on the ancient and divine wisdom that Renaissance scholars defined as 'natural magic' (*magia naturalis*). Trithemius's philosophical objective was to comprehend the trajectory of human history in the context of an astrological framework that offered a grammar of prediction and prophetic knowledge. Such overarching framework necessitated that theology be regarded as a concentrated examination of Scripture, to which astrology must have been incorporated. In order to evaluate the extent to which the writing of history also entails the revelation of its esoteric meaning, it is necessary to undertake a review of Trithemius's conception of history and its associated esoteric principles, which were founded upon a magical-religious understanding of time.

II. What is History Worth?

Trithemius's enthusiasm for history and passion for writing history are both evident throughout his intellectual activity, as evidenced by his exploration of a wide range of genres, including historical annals, literary catalogues, ecclesiastical chronicles, hagiographies, and bio-bibliographical compilations. A substantial proportion of his writings pertain to the history of literature, encompassing lists of Christian writers and their works, such as *De viribus illustribus ordinis sancti Benedicti* (1492), *De laude scriptorium manualium* (1494), *De scriptoribus ecclesiasticis* (1494), and *Catalogus illustrium virorum Germaniam ... exornantium* (1495). A further consistent group of historical texts comprises chronicles and annals, which focus on individual institutions, kingdoms, or nations: *Annales Hirsaugienses* (1509–1514), *Chronicon Spanheimense* (1495–1514), *Chronicon successionis ducum Bavariae* (1500–1506), and *Compendium sive breviarium ... de origine regum et gentis Francorum* (1515).

² See NIKOLAUS STAUBACH, *Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit. Die historiographischen Fiktionen des Johannes Trithemius im Lichte seines wissenschaftlichen Selbstverständnisses*, in *Fälschungen im Mittelalter, Internationaler Kongreß der Monumenta Germaniae Historica, München, 16.-19. September 1986*, vol. I, Harrassowitz, München 1988, p. 263–316; RICHARD AUERNHEIMER, FRANK BARON (eds.), *Johannes Trithemius: Humanismus und Magie in Vorreformatorische Deutschland*, Profil, München 1992; HARALD MÜLLER, *Habit und Habitus. Mönche und Humanisten im Dialog*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2006, p. 194–244; ARMIN SCHLECHTER, FRANZ STEPHAN PELGEN (eds.), *Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516). Benediktiner, Humanist und Kirchenreformer*, Landesbibliothekszentrum Rheinland-Pfalz, Koblenz 2016; ANTHONY GRAFTON, *Magus. The Art of Magic from Faustus to Agrippa*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2023, p. 125–171.

In addition to these works, he authored hagiographies, including the *Vita beati Rabani Mauri* (1515) and the *Vita beati Maximi, episcopi Moguntini* (1516).³

The multifaceted nature of these writings attests to the abbot's antiquarian and encyclopedic interest, as evidenced by his commitment to producing detailed catalogues and extensive historical accounts. As Harald Müller and Johannes Helmrath have observed, Trithemius's preoccupation with the uninhibited proliferation of knowledge as a cultural phenomenon of his time is noteworthy. Trithemius's catalogues were designed to function as a bibliographical guide or a scholarly reference point. They aimed to facilitate navigating the accelerated dissemination of information enabled by the growing circulation of manuscripts and the rise of printing. This, in turn, was beginning to exert a dominant influence on the book market within the Holy Roman Empire. This didactic impetus, coupled with Trithemius's disdain for the innovation brought about by Gutenberg, which he perceived as detrimental to the work of amanuenses, led him to become a voracious collector of manuscripts. He used these as a tireless compiler of historical information, not always with an eye to philological correctness and historical accuracy.⁴

Nevertheless, Trithemius's understanding of the past entailed an examination of the merits of historical knowledge, the objective of acquiring which was the religious edification of the individual. This necessitated an introduction to the study of Scripture and the identification of the advancements made by Christian truth. Trithemius's confrontation with Italian humanism did not challenge the apostolic responsibilities he assigned to himself as a historiographer. As Klaus Arnold summarised in his analysis of Trithemius's *De scriptoribus ecclesiasticis*: « The literary past is, for him – despite his own extensive knowledge of Greek and Roman classics – primarily of significance as a Christian era. All secular education appears to the Benedictine – much like to the entirety of the Middle Ages – as merely a preparatory stage for the study of the Holy Scriptures ». ⁵ In contrast to humanists

³ This classification of Trithemius's historical writings into three primary genres – catalogues of Christian erudites, chronicles and annals, and ecclesiastical biographies – is derived from BRANN, *The Abbot Trithemius*, p. 306. For a complete list, see ARNOLD, *Johannes Trithemius*, p. 240–246.

⁴ MÜLLER, *Habit und Habitus*, p. 42; JOHANNES HELMRATH, « Perception of the Middle Ages and Self-Perception in German Humanism: Johannes Trithemius and the *Catalogus illustrium virorum Germaniam ... exornantium* », in PATRICK BAKER (ed.), *Biography, Historiography, and Modes of Philosophizing. The Tradition of Collective Biography in Early Modern Europe*, Brill, Leiden 2017, p. 183; see also ZAMBELLI, *White Magic, Black Magic*, p. 74–75.

⁵ KLAUS ARNOLD, « *De viris illustribus*: Aus den Anfängen der humanistischen Literaturgeschichtsschreibung: Johannes Trithemius und andere Schriftstellerkataloge des 15. Jahrhunderts », *Humanistica Lovaniensia*, 42 (1993), p. 63: « Die literarische Vergangenheit ist ihm – ungeachtet seiner eigenen guten Kenntnis der griechischen und römischen Klassiker – in erster Linie als eine christliche Epoche von Bedeutung. Alle weltliche Bildung erscheint dem Benediktiner – wie dem gesamten Mittelalter – lediglich als Vorstufe zum Studium der Heiligen Schrift, [...] ».

such as Francesco Petrarca, Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, and Lorenzo Valla, Trithemius did not engage in a comparative analysis of classical antiquity – considered the pinnacle of human cultural development – with the subsequent period of decline that gave rise to scholastic philosophy.⁶ For Trithemius, the historical process did not entail a rupture between these stages, but rather a continuity. He perceived Christianity as the cohesive force that ensured the transmission of the classical heritage into subsequent centuries, serving as a theoretical unifying principle across the epochs.

Such a harmonious transfer of knowledge, which can be thought of as a *translatio studii*, paralleled a *translatio imperii* from the Roman Empire to the Frankish kingdom. It showed that the ‘barbarians’ expressed a kind of revival of classical culture together with the triumph of Christian scholarship. This process reached its apogee in the reign of Charlemagne, who was held up as an exemplar of a life dedicated to the cultivation of culture and religion in Trithemius’s *Catalogus illustrium virorum Germaniam ... exornantium*. Charlemagne’s legacy would become a source of pride for future emperors of the Holy Roman Empire.⁷ At the same time, the abbot asserted that the maintenance of Christian culture was entrusted to the workshops for the dissemination of authentic monastic learning, exemplified by the Benedictine Order, whose reform he promoted in accordance with the Bursfeld Congregation, and whose cultural supremacy in the German nation he emphasised.⁸

In addressing the theoretical underpinnings of historical writing, Trithemius’s prefaces to the first and second volume of his *Annales Hirsaugienses* offered concise yet comprehensive discourse on the historiographical methodology. The first preface delineated the formal components of historical composition, while the subsequent focused on the cultural imperatives of the historiographical vocation. In the examination of historical narrative, it is mandatory for every author to strive for a harmonious balance between veracity (*veritas*) and elegance (*decor*). Any account of facts should be an attempt to tell the truth, as the Christian writer is opposed to falsehood. Simultaneously, every historiographer must be mindful of stylistic embellishment, adhering to the principles of rhetoric established by ancient classical writers. An ideal narrative should be characterised by a judicious

⁶ For a discussion of Trithemius’s dual use of the adjective *scholasticus*, referring both to the theologians practising scholastic philosophy in the university and to the kind of language or style associated with scholastic learning, see HELMRATH, *Perception of the Middle Ages*, p. 190.

⁷ HELMRATH, *Perception of the Middle Ages*, p. 206. The entry entitled ‘Charlemagne’ from Trithemius’s *Catalogus* is edited and translated Ibid., p. 222–226.

⁸ PAUL JOACHIMSEN, *Geschichtsauffassung und Geschichtsschreibung in Deutschland unter dem Einfluss des Humanismus*, Teubner, Leipzig – Berlin 1910, vol. 1, p. 51–55; NICOLAUS HEUTGER, *Bursfelde und seine Reformklöster in Niedersachsen*, August Lax, Hildesheim 1969, p. 22, 48.

balance of verbal simplicity, which is achieved by asserting clarity and sincerity as a counter to the deceptive nature of language.⁹

In addition to style, the meticulous writer should possess an understanding of the appropriate historiographical genre for the narrative being crafted. Trithemius identified at least three main types of historical narrative, which differ in terms of scope and size of the subject matter they address. The *catholicon* (universal) encompassed the history of the world, including the deeds of peoples, kingdoms, empires, and their rulers, as well as the history of humanity in its entirety. The *idicon* (particular) pertained to the history of a distinct nation or people, whilst the *topicon* (local) focused on events related to a more specific locale, such as a city, an institution, or a family. To illustrate this point, one might consider the history of a monastery and its abbots, as exemplified by Trithemius's Hirsau annals, as well as the records of aristocratic dynasties and their members.¹⁰

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that historical memory serves both as an ornament and an enhancement to the state when assessing the value of history.¹¹ Trithemius's approach reveals its patriotic and propagandistic nature, as he aimed to foster a sense of self-awareness among the German people, echoing the ideology of both Celtis and Wimpfeling, who pursued similar objectives during the same period. As a member of the *Sodalitas Litteraria Rhenana* in Mainz, Trithemius responded to Celtis's call for the rediscovery of a glorious German identity by studying the origins and achievements of the ancient Germans. He argued that this subject had been willfully neglected, if not misrepresented, by historians over the centuries.¹² Consequently, he articulated his position with striking clarity: « We are Germans, we live in the Kingdom of Germany. Therefore, we are right to prioritize our own affairs ».¹³

This chauvinistic endeavour, shared by scholars such as Sebastian Brant, Willibald Pirckheimer, Beatus Rhenanus and Johannes Nauclerus, was intended to underline the fact that German history had been little cultivated. However, Trithemius regarded the achievements of the Germans to be as significant as those of the Romans, according to a triumphant historical process that culminated in

⁹ IOANNES TRITHEMIUS, *Annales Hirsaugienses, Praefatio*, Johannes Georgius Schlegel 1690, vol. I, fol. A3r. See BRANN, *The Abbot Trithemius*, p. 316–317. For a comprehensive information on the genesis of the *Annales*, see ARNOLD, *Johannes Trithemius*, p. 153–157.

¹⁰ TRITHEMIUS, *Annales Hirsaugienses*, vol. I, fol. A3v. See ARNOLD, *Johannes Trithemius*, p. 144–146; BRANN, *The Abbot Trithemius*, p. 317–318.

¹¹ TRITHEMIUS, *Annales Hirsaugienses*, vol. I, fol. A3r. See BRANN, *The Abbot Trithemius*, p. 314.

¹² TRITHEMIUS, *Annales Hirsaugienses, Epistola proemialis*, vol. II, fol. A3v. For a discussion of Celtis's call to redeem the glory of the German people, see his speech delivered to the students of the Ingolstadt Gymnasium, as recorded in KONRAD CELTIS, *Panegyris ad duces Bavariae, Oratio in Gymnasio in Ingelstadio publice recitata*, Erhard Ratdolt 1492, fol. A5v. On Celtis's idea of *translatio imperii* from Italy to Germany, see *Ibid.*, fol. A5r.

¹³ TRITHEMIUS, *Annales Hirsaugienses*, vol. I, fol. A3v.

the Empire of Maximilian I. While Celtis contended that the ancient Germans preferred to express themselves in Greek rather than Latin, Wimpfeling urged Trithemius to acknowledge that high culture had always existed in Germany.¹⁴ In a similar fashion, Trithemius later propagated the myth, based on the contested provenance of the purported chronicler 'Hunibald', that the House of Habsburg was descended, through the Frankish Merovingians and Carolingians, from the Trojan heroes who fled to Germany to evade defeat at the hands of the Achaeans.¹⁵

Nonetheless, Trithemius deemed it essential to investigate the reasons behind the limited interest among scholars in the Germanic past. The scarcity of written records, coupled with the discord among the few that remain, are the primary factors contributing to this neglect. This situation can be traced back to at least two significant political causes. Firstly, the ancient Germans were an exceptionally warlike people, constantly engaged in struggles for survival. Their frequent and brutal conflicts with neighbouring tribes led them to prioritize military activities over the cultivation of literature. Secondly, the majority of their rulers were marked by a lack of moral integrity and a penchant for indolence, their actions offering little of value to be preserved in history. As a result, they failed to promote the glory of their people, viewing history not as a tool for commemoration, but as an irrelevant and even harmful force to the state.¹⁶

In this context, Trithemius placed significant emphasis on the pivotal role that memory, understood as the act of recording what is truly valuable, plays in defining the scope of historical inquiry. This critical emphasis enables us to concentrate on the comprehensive philosophical significance that Trithemius ascribed to historical writing. In accordance with the teachings of St. Augustine, Trithemius acknowledged the existence of three fundamental faculties within the human soul: intellect, memory, and will. The function of memory is to mediate between the will and the intellect, and it attains its highest form of expression in the recording of past events that transcend the limitations of time. History, therefore, serves to delineate those occurrences that are worthy of remembrance. It not only enables the recollection of past events, but also bestows upon humanity an enduring quality, as it showcases the indelible actions of eminent figures, which serve as exemplars of virtue and timelessness:

¹⁴ CELTIS, *Panegyris*, fol. A4r. See Wimpfeling's letter to Trithemius (17 September 1492), published as a paratext in the *Catalogus illustrium virorum Germaniam ... exornantium*, in HELMRATH, « Perception of the Middle Ages », p. 216–218. For a detailed analysis of Celtis and Wimpfeling's influence on Trithemius's cultural project, see BRANN, *The Abbot Trithemius*, p. 241–245.

¹⁵ BRANN, *The Abbot Trithemius*, p. 95, 236–241, 325.

¹⁶ TRITHEMIUS, *Annales Hirsaugienses*, vol. II, fol. A3v.

History is the preserver of a certain everlasting memory (*sempiternae quaedam memoriae conservatrix*) which, by inducing a certain venerable recollection, alone makes immortal the fame of good men who by their wisdom, courage, or holiness have succeeded with great labor in striving beyond and distinguishing themselves from ordinary men.¹⁷

History provides a source of moral and spiritual nourishment, offering insights that encourage the pursuit of virtue and goodness. Furthermore, it documents the fundamental tenets of Christianity, recalling the pivotal events that have shaped its history. Accordingly, the discipline of historiography serves an apostolic function, namely the proclamation of the divine message:

If before us there had not existed any writers of historical affairs, who would have made known to the vulgar in the present day the origin of the world, the computation of all the years past, and those things which by and by have occurred among mortal men? Who would have been able to persuade the ignorant of the Incarnation, of the Nativity from the Virgin in its purity, and of the doctrine, miracles, passion, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ? Or who today would unfold for us, or would believe others unfolding, the passions of martyrs; the lives, conversations, and miracles of the saints; the sack of Troy; the spacious empire of the Roman world; the remarkable thoughts or deeds of the kings, philosophers, and princes; and all the other things which are very worthy of our knowledge? Only by history may it come about that, by means of reading, we who are separated by a very long period of time from those ancients may both be witnesses to their deeds and live with them in their own times.¹⁸

In its exhortation to engage in virtuous actions and to promote the welfare of others, history unites the recollection of past events with the anticipation of future rewards for the soul. Moreover, it serves a civic function, enhancing prudence and foresight by illustrating the misdeeds of malevolent individuals, whose actions we learn to condemn.¹⁹

III. *Beyond Nature: Philomagus's Concerns*

Trithemius's pronounced interest in history reflects his acute awareness of the political and religious significance of the historiographer. However, his engagement with history cannot be fully appreciated without considering his involvement in occult philosophy, a field to which he consistently attributed paramount importance. The intersection of history, religion, and occultism within

¹⁷ BRANN, *The Abbot Trithemius*, p. 314. See TRITHEMIUS, *Annales Hirsaugienses*, vol. I, fol. A2v.

¹⁸ BRANN, *The Abbot Trithemius*, p. 314–315. See TRITHEMIUS, *Annales Hirsaugienses*, vol. I, fol. A2v.

¹⁹ TRITHEMIUS, *Annales Hirsaugienses*, vol. I, fol. A2v–A3r. See ARNOLD, *Johannes Tritihemius*, p. 144–145.

his intellectual framework was central to his theological profile. Simultaneously, his contribution to the discourse on the value of esoteric knowledge influenced the philosophical debates surrounding the occult sciences in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, significantly shaping the intellectual trajectories of learned figures such as Agrippa von Nettesheim, Theophrastus Paracelsus, Giordano Bruno, John Dee, Robert Fludd, and Athanasius Kircher.²⁰

Trithemius's interest in magic and witchcraft followed two distinct yet interrelated paths, contributing to his controversial reputation. On one hand, he was regarded as a devotee of necromancy and demonology; on the other, he presented himself as a stringent critic of esoteric literature and a staunch opponent of witchcraft. His writings, including *Liber octo quaestionum* (1508), *Antipalus maleficiorum* (1508), the unfinished *De daemonibus* (1507), and the pseudepigraphic *Synusiastes Melanii Triandrici ad Iaymielem* (1508), position him as both a Christian apologist and an erudite cataloguer of forbidden arts. These works systematically categorize occult practices such as sorcery, enchantments, curses, necromancy, and demon summoning, while also offering guidance on remedies such as exorcism. In this regard, they serve a pedagogical function similar to his historical writings, providing guidance in a field of knowledge that is both complex and fraught with ambiguity. Trithemius's aim in composing such controversial texts was to dispel the secrecy surrounding witchcraft, which he viewed as both an ethical and religious issue that required open denunciation and theological framing.²¹

Concurrently, his parallel contributions on cryptography, including *Steganographia* (1499) and *Polygraphia* (1508), evince a discernible engagement with what Renaissance scholars usually referred to as *magia naturalis*. In this context, Trithemius distinguished between the condemned practices of demonic magic, which he termed *magia superstitiosa* and framed under the notion of witchcraft, and the divinely inspired wisdom, practised by ancient philosophers, which was

²⁰ For an in-depth examination of the reception of the Trithemian magic, see BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 157–237.

²¹ On Trithemius and the witch issue, see KLAUS ARNOLD, « Hexenglaube und Humanismus bei Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516) », in PETER SEGL (ed.), *Der Hexenhammer. Entstehung und Umfeld des Malleus maleficarum von 1487*, Böhlau, Köln 1988, p. 217–240; BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 51–57. Trithemius presented a self-portrayal as an enemy of witchcraft in his *De daemonibus*: see KLAUS ARNOLD, « Additamenta Trithemiana. Nachträge zu Leben und Werk des Johannes Trithemius, insbesondere zur Schrift *De demonibus* », *Würzburger Diözesan-Geschichtblätter*, 37/38 (1975), p. 258. On the remedies against evil spell, see TRITHEMIUS, *Antipalus maleficiorum libri IV*, in IOANNES BUSEUS, *Paralipomena opusculorum Petri Blenensis et Ioannis Trithemii*, E typhographeo Balthasaris Lippij, Mainz 1605, p. 275–276. A theological interpretation of witchcraft is developed in Trithemius's answer to Emperor Maximilian I on the sixth question about the power of witches (*De potestate maleficarum*) in Id., *Liber octo quaestionum*, Impensis Iohannis Hasselbergen, Oppenheim 1515, fol. F3v–F4r.

rooted in the knowledge of nature. In this regard, he revisited and reinterpreted older classifications of this disputed branch of knowledge to the clarification of which had consistently contributed medieval scholars such as Isidore of Seville, William of Auvergne, Albertus Magnus, and Roger Bacon. Relying on the views of those scholars who had legitimized the interest in *magia naturalis*, particularly William of Auvergne and Albertus Magnus, Trithemius argued that magic, though stigmatised, was a learned science aligned with nature's laws and absolutely beneficial to humanity. Accordingly, he advocated for the integration of *magia naturalis* into Christian scholarship, presenting it as both a useful tool for rulers and a complement to, rather than a rival of, religious wisdom.²²

Trithemius's position resonated with the broader Renaissance debate on natural magic, championed by scholars such as Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. The medieval distinction between natural and demonic magic was further elaborated by Ficino and Pico, who endorsed the former as a legitimate pursuit of science. Ficino conceptualised natural magic as the harmonious interplay of celestial and terrestrial forces, aimed at enhancing human well-being. Meanwhile, Pico elevated magic as the practical culmination of the knowledge of nature and considered it as the completion of natural philosophy. Within this intellectual framework, the rehabilitation of the *magus* figure was a recurring theme in the writings of both philosophers, who drew consistently on ancient pagan sources such as Plato, Apuleius, and Iamblichus, to depict the magician as a sage and priest. They revived an idealized image of the magician as conceived in antiquity, emphasizing his role as a custodian of divine wisdom related to religion and his capacity to mediate between the human and divine realms.²³

This religious shift, which underscores a rupture between the Florentine philosophers and their medieval forerunners, led to the redefinition of the *magus* as the wise and learned 'minister' of the divine, regenerated through both faith

²² See his letter to Joachim of Brandenburg (June 26, 1503), in TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, Apud Ioannem Birckmannum, Coloniae 1567, p. 102: « Magia autem naturalis pura est, solida, stabilis, et licita, quae principes maxime decet et ornat, nec umquam ab ecclesia prohibita, nec etiam iure prohibenda, quippe quae puris principiis naturae innititur, nullamque superstitionem admittit ». This programmatic claim is based on GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, *Conclusiones magicæ numero XXVI secundum opinionem propriam*, n. 2–3, in STEPHEN ALAN FARMER (ed.), *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486). The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, Tempe (Ariz.) 1998: « Magia naturalis licita est, et non prohibita, et de huius scientiae uniuersalibus theoreticis fundamentis pono infrascriptas conclusiones secundum propriam opinionem. Magia est pars practica scientiae naturalis ». On the distinction between *magia naturalis* and *magia superstitiosa*, see Trithemius's letter to Johannes von Westerburg (May 10, 1503) in TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 91–92.

²³ For a comprehensive discussion of Ficino and Pico's contribution to the Renaissance debate on natural magic, see DANIEL PICKERING WALKER, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, Warburg Institute, London 1958; PAOLA ZAMBELLI, *L'ambigua natura della magia. Filosofi, streghe, riti nel Rinascimento*, Marsilio, Venezia 1996; ZAMBELLI, *White Magic*, p. 13–34.

and knowledge. While they employed metaphorical language to depict the magician as the ‘collaborator’ of nature, both Ficino and Pico ultimately sought to extend the *magus*’s influence beyond the natural realm. They argued that true magicians could legitimately access religious mysteries by establishing contact with divine entities – such as demons, angels, stars, and planets. As a result, the traditional role of the magician as a humble servant of nature was reimagined, transforming the *magus* into a new, benevolent figure with the authority to interpret the Word of God, acquire prophetic gifts, and perform miracles. Such a theoretical program was designed to lend legitimacy to the practice of magic within Christian culture. In this way, Ficino recalled the chapters from the Gospel in which the Three Magi pay homage to the birth of Christ. He even went so far as to claim that, by linking lower beings to higher ones for the benefit of humanity, magicians performed a function akin to that of God. Similarly, Pico, an early advocate of Jewish Kabbalah, believed it could offer insight into the miracles of Christ, positioning this mystical tradition as a legitimate form of magic.²⁴

To defend his reputation as a Christian scholar, Trithemius addressed accusations of engaging in forbidden arts in his autobiographical *Nepiachus*, by distinguishing between two forms of magic. His esoteric knowledge, allegedly acquired from the mysterious figures of Libanius Gallus and Pelagius of Maiorca (whom he identified with Fernando de Cordoba), enabled him to differentiate between natural magic, « which, as Pico declares, teaches us how to perform marvelous works by means of mediating natural virtues », and evil magic « which is effected with the cooperation of evil spirits ». ²⁵ Accordingly, Trithemius classified occult phenomena into four types of illusion (*praestigium*), three of which were attributed to demons, while the last was considered to have a divine origin. The first type, he explained, required demonic intervention through explicit conjuring; the second relied on verbal enchantments, allowing demons to operate indirectly; the third, practiced by jugglers, could nevertheless be attributed to some form of demonic assistance; finally, the *praestigium naturale*, based on hidden virtues, « pertains to natural magic, under whose auspices marvelous effects (the causes of which those who admire them do not understand) are produced by proficient through the occult application of natural virtue ». ²⁶

Trithemius adopted the latter form of illusion, aligning himself with Pico’s and, earlier, Albertus Magnus’s interest in occult arts. By presenting himself as a

²⁴ MARSILIO FICINO, *Three Books on Life*, ed. CAROL V. KASKE, JOHN. R. CLARK, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, Tempe (Ariz.) 1989, p. 395–397; GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, *Conclusiones magicae*, p. 496–503.

²⁵ BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 112. See TRITHEMIUS, *Nepiachus*, in *Corpus historicum medii aevi...*, ed. JOHANN GEORG VON ECKHART, apud Johann Friedrich Gleditsch, Leipzig 1723, vol. II, col. 1830.

²⁶ BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 113. See TRITHEMIUS, *Nepiachus*, col. 1831.

philomagus, a 'lover of magic', he sought to legitimise a discipline he was labeling as 'wisdom of nature' (*sapientia naturae*).²⁷ He recalled the same scriptural argument earlier advanced by Ficino:

This word 'magic' is Persian, and the Latin term for it is wisdom. Magi is the term for wise men, like those three who, as the gospel tells us, came from the East to adore the newborn son of God in the flesh in his cradle. I am not ashamed to be called a 'philomagus' with them, since I love divine, human, and natural learning. This is my magic, which I follow. No member of the faithful may traffic with the other, which is superstitious, diabolical and justly condemned by the holy church. I despise, loathe, and condemn it, with its authors.²⁸

This theological framework allowed Trithemius's to advocate for a *restauratio magiae*, a restoration of an ancient wisdom underpinning legitimate magic. In a series of epistolary exchanges between 1503 and 1505, prior to his expulsion from Sponheim, Trithemius had already articulated his esoteric program. Corresponding with Germain de Ganay, Johannes von Westenburg and Joachim of Brandenburg, he addressed the revitalisation of magic. He lamented the « unjust damnation of this good and holy science of natural magic » (« haec bonae sanctaeque scientiae magiae naturalis iniusta damnatio »), which he attributed to ignorance and the spread of fraudulent literature that promoted superstitious and malign occult practices. As an exceedingly difficult science, it had been transmitted through an enigmatic language, employed by ancient authors to prevent the uneducated from accessing this divine wisdom. Moreover, many detractors and impostors condemned the books on magic as heretical and deceitful because they were unable to understand their true, non-literal meaning, and consequently were incapable of performing genuine wonders.²⁹

In this context, Trithemius contended that such a defamed discipline, founded on natural principles, was essential for state rulers, religious instruction, and intellectual elevation altogether. His definition of magic was as incisive as revealing of the Florentine underlying framework: « By magic I mean nothing but wisdom, namely the understanding of physical and metaphysical things, which

²⁷ TRITHEMIUS, *Nepiachus*, col. 1831.

²⁸ GRAFTON, *Magus*, p. 154. See TRITHEMIUS, *Nepiachus*, col. 1831. The same scriptural argument had already been put forward by Albertus Magnus, who stated that the word *magus* denoted the 'great' (*magnus*) wise man, who knows all things from their necessary causes, and by conjecturing the effects of natural things is able to exhibit and produce marvels. See BRANN, *Trithemius and Magic Theology*, p. 23.

²⁹ See both Trithemius's letter to Johannes von Westenburg (May 10, 1503) in TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 91–92, and the aforementioned letter to Joachim von Brandenburg, in *ibid.*, p. 105–109.

consists in a science of divine and natural virtues ». ³⁰ When comprehended correctly, this learning could elevate the soul to divine contemplation, fostering miraculous powers sanctioned by God. As a consequence, he envisioned the *magus* as the Ficinian and Pichian virtuous, God-fearing sage, endowed with celestial favour and intellectual rigor, whose primary objective was to contemplate God as the principle of everything. Therefore, according to this theoretical vision, magic becomes a sacred journey towards that wisdom that brings us close to God by awakening miraculous virtues, such as to make us miracle workers on behalf of God. As Trithemius proclaimed in his correspondence with Germain de Ganay:

Our philosophy is heavenly, not worldly, that we might faithfully behold, by a direct intuition of the mind through faith and knowledge, that Founder of things Whom we call God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one Founder, one God, and one Highest Good existing in a Trinity of eternal Persons, and also that we may believe in His existence with conviction and become intimately acquainted with Him from Whom all things present to us derive, always adoring Him with a very fervid display of love and service. ³¹

This path of knowledge unfolds in theoretical stages which mirror the phases of alchemical transmutation as a pattern for inner transformation. As Trithemius articulated: « Study generates knowledge; knowledge prepares love; love, similarity; similarity, communion; communion, virtue; virtue, dignity; dignity, power; and power performs the miracle ». ³² In this process of becoming acquainted with God and elevating the mind to acquire miraculous virtue, Trithemius honored what he considered a legitimate study and a beneficiary undertaking, « the sole path to the goal of magical perfections both divine and natural, by the virtue of which it is protected and propagated far from deceptive, diabolical, and superstitious influence ». ³³

IV. Learning to Browse Time

Among the historiographical writings in Trithemius's œuvre, *On the Seven Secondary Causes* reveals an intriguing philosophical challenge, providing valuable insight into the theoretical synthesis of the abbot's dual interests – magic and history – in a concerted endeavour to comprehend reality. Entitled *De septem secundeis, id est, intelligentiis, sive spiritibus orbes post Deum moventibus... libellus*, this

³⁰ See Trithemius's letter to Germain de Ganay (August 24, 1505) in *De septem secundeis*, p. 73: « Nihil aliud per magiam intelligi volumus quam sapientiam, physicarum scilicet et metaphysicarum intelligentiam rerum, quae divinarum et naturalium virtutum scientia constat ».

³¹ BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 127. See TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 69–70.

³² BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 127. See TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 72–73.

³³ BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 127. See TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 73.

work is situated within early sixteenth-century literature on historical and political predictions based on what Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* (II, 4) considered as world astrology. This discipline focused on the influence produced by celestial bodies – such as stars and planets – on various regions of the Earth and, by extension, on human affairs. Ptolemy's model sought to explain the unique characteristics of nations and civilizations by linking specific geographical areas to particular astral influences. Within this framework, mental dispositions, cultural practices, religious beliefs, social structures, and even quotidian customs – such as dress, diet, and burial rites – were understood to be shaped by the stars under which each people had emerged. This model provided a remarkably coherent, though highly schematic, explanation for cultural diversity.³⁴

Trithemius's *libellus*, which Friedrich von Bezold included in his review of the medieval «astrologische Geschichtskonstruktion», is an lengthy letter to Emperor Maximilian I. Composed in 1508, it was only published posthumously in 1522 by the Protestant reformer Johann Marquard of Meßkirch, at the Hieronymus Hoeltzel printing house in Nürnberg.³⁵ In this work, which falls within the genre of *catholicon* and later became known as *chronologia mystica*, Trithemius presents a universal chronology extending from creation to 1525. He divides world history into 21 cycles of 354 lunar years and 4 lunar months, governed by seven spirits or intelligences, each presiding over the seven planets: Saturn–*Orifiel*, Jupiter–*Zachariel*, Mars–*Samael*, Sun–*Michael*, Venus–*Anael*, Mercury–*Raphael*, Moon–*Gabriel*. A substantial number of authors of universal chronicles – ancient, medieval, and contemporary, both Christian and pagan – may have influenced the conceptualization of history as a sequence of cycles or epochs. Among the more

³⁴ FRANZ BOLL, CARL BEZOLD, WILLHELM GUNDEL, *Stern Glaube und Sterneutung. Die Geschichte und das Wesen der Astrologie*, Teubner, 3rd ed., Leipzig – Berlin 1926, p. 65–66.

³⁵ The printing was accompanied by a German translation, entitled *Von den syben Geysten oder Engeln*. In his dedicatory preface to Abbot Jakob Zweifel von Amorbach, Marquard explained that after having found the manuscript in the library of Johannes Schwebel in Pforzheim, he copied and prepared it for publication due to its prescient insights into contemporary events: TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundadeis, idest, intelligentijs, siue spiritibus mouentibus orbes, libellus*, Impressum Nurenberge impensis Ioannis Haselbergs, Nürnberg 1522, fol. Aij. The enduring popularity of the work is attested by numerous reprints (Speyer 1529, Frankfurt 1545, Köln 1567, Strasbourg 1613) and translations into Dutch and French. See FRIEDRICH VON BEZOLD, «Astrologische Geschichtskonstruktion im Mittelalter», *Zeitschrift für Geisteswissenschaft*, 8 (1892), p. 67–72; ZAMBELLI, *White Magic*, p. 73–80; NOEL L. BRANN, «The Shift from Mystical to Magical Theology in the Abbot Trithemius (1462–1516)», *Studies in Medieval Culture*, 11 (1977), p. 147–159. Henceforth, unless otherwise stated, all Latin citations are drawn from the 1567 edition of the *De septem secundeis*. On Marquard and Schwebel, see ARNO MENTZEL-REUTERS, «Serielle Chronographie und historische Unschärfe. Das historiographische Spätwerk des Johannes Trithemius», in MARKUS FRANKL, MARTINA HARTMANN, DOROTHEA KLEIN (eds.), *Herbipolis. Studien zu Stadt und Hochstift Würzburg in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2015, p. 387–388, note 77.

recent writers explicitly cited by Trithemius in the preface to the *Annales Hirsaugienses*, notable examples include Jacopo Filippo Foresti's *Supplementum Chronicarum* (1483), Marcantonio Sabellico's *Enneades sive Rhapsodia Historiarum* (1498), and, above all, Hartmann Schedel's *Liber Chronicarum* (1493). At the same time, contemporary poetry – as exemplified by Celtis's *Carmen saeculare* and *Germania generalis* – also offered him a model for elaborating on a Christian interpretation of the ancient pagan planetary deities.³⁶

Adhering to Aristotelian cosmology, Trithemius argued that these angelic governors function as secondary causes through which divine providence directs the course of earthly events. Each of these angels holds regency for no less than three periods throughout the ages, thereby establishing a causal link for phenomena that significantly impact both the natural and human realms. These events encompass, though are not limited to, natural occurrences such as earthquakes, tidal waves, and eclipses, alongside human-affecting events like wars, famines, plagues, the rise of new religions, and the formation of new kingdoms. In this framework, Trithemius sought to demonstrate how these cycles of influence were integral to the unfolding of history, with the celestial intelligences acting as intermediaries between the divine will and the material world.³⁷

Trithemius's idea of cycles of planetary governance is highly structured. Human history begins with Orifiel's reign in the first lunar year and concludes with Michael's third reign, projected to end around 2233 AD. The birth of Christ is positioned in the lunar year 245 of the third reign of Orifiel, which corresponds to

³⁶ TRITHEMIUS, *Annales Hirsaugienses*, vol. I, fol. A3v. On Celtis, see MENTZEL-REUTERS, « Serielle Chronographie », p. 389–390.

³⁷ Trithemius attributed this causal pattern to Peter of Abano, whose influence will be discussed shortly. See TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 3: « Veterum sententia est plurimorum, sapientissime Caesar, mundum hunc inferiorem ordinatione primi intellectus, qui Deus est, per secundas intelligentias gubernari, quorum opinioni conciliator assentiens medicorum dicit, septem planetis spiritus septem a principio coeli et terrae praefectos. Quorum unusquisque mundum annis gubernat trecentist, quinquaginta quatuor, mensibusque ex ordine quaternis ». As Arnold observed, Trithemius may also have been acquainted with this doctrine through Konrad Wimpina's critique of it in his *Tractatus... de nobilitate celestis corporis...*, [Leipzig 1503], fol. Iijr–v. See ARNOLD, *Johannes Trithemius*, p. 163; On Wimpina, see also LYNN THORNDIKE, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, Columbia University Press, New York 1923–1941, vol. IV, p. 268–273. Trithemius's system of angelic cycles encompassing the whole of history, organised according to lunar years, is devised as follows: First cycle: Orifiel (Saturn), 1–354; Anael (Venus), 354–708; Zachariel (Jupiter), 708–1063; Raphael (Mercury), 1063–1417; Samael (Mars), 1417–1771; Gabriel (Moon), 1771–2126; Michael (Sun), 2126–2480. Second cycle: Orifiel (Saturn), 2480–2834; Anael (Venus), 2834–3189; Zachariel (Jupiter), 3189–3543; Raphael (Mercury), 3543–3897; Samael (Mars), 3897–4252; Gabriel (Moon), 4252–4606; Michael (Sun), 4606–4960. Third cycle: Orifiel (Saturn), 4960–5315; Anael (Saturn), 5315–5669; Zachariel (Jupiter), 5669–6023; Raphael (Mercury), 6023–6378; Samael (Mars), 6378–6732; Gabriel (Moon), 6732–7086; Michael (Sun), 7086–7441.

lunar year 5205 from creation. The whole account culminates in a religious prediction that is set to occur during Samael's third cycle (6378–6732 lunar years), with a particular emphasis on the year 1525 AD. However, the subsequent Gabriel's (final) cycle remains unelaborated.³⁸ In compiling this chronicle, Trithemius employed an astrological framework to organise significant historical events, according to an increasing timeline. Nevertheless, rather than focusing solely on a developing linear order of facts, he connected each historical period to the qualities of the planetary cycle governing it. This approach enables history to be interpreted through a synoptic perspective that links events to the characteristics of the ruling planets. In essence, the nature of celestial influences shapes earthly occurrences, providing an astrological lens through which to understand the progression of history.

As historical events are synchronised with the governance of the planets, Trithemius's account is predicated on the following interpretive framework. In the first cycle of Samael-Mars, the Deluge is said to have occurred, followed by the Trojan War and the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the subsequent cycle. The third cycle, characterized by increasing historical complexity, is associated with a series of natural phenomena such as eclipses, earthquakes, and tidal waves, which coincide with significant political events. Notably, the rise of Frederick Barbarossa marks the beginning of the third Samael cycle, while the ascent of Emperor Maximilian I signals its conclusion. This period also encompasses the initial incursions of the Tartars and later the Turks, alongside the establishment of monastic orders and the prophetic prediction of Christianity's eventual decline.³⁹

Similarly, in his consideration of Zachariel-Jupiter, Trithemius underscores its consistent and positive influence on the advancement of human civilisation. In the first cycle, marked by the death of Adam, humanity transitions from a state of barbarism to one of lawfulness, establishes religious monotheism, and gains the moral discernment between good and evil, thereby embracing ethical living. The second cycle is characterized by abundance, justice, and the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham, alongside the promise of eternal salvation. During this phase, Prometheus plays a pivotal role in civilizing humanity, imparting the arts, and fostering the development of inventions essential for survival. The third cycle witnesses the emergence of influential figures, such as King Arthur, Boethius, Saint Benedict, and Emperor Justinian, shaping an era defined by extraordinary individuals.⁴⁰

Trithemius's fascination with cryptography, evident in his controversial *Steganographia* and in its amended reworking, the *Polygraphia*, underpins the

³⁸ TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 4–5; *Ibid.*, p. 60–61.

³⁹ TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 10–11, 22–23, 47–60.

⁴⁰ TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 7–8, 18–20, 40–44.

historiographical system employed in the *De septem secundeis*. The *Steganographia*, which Trithemius chose not to publish during his lifetime in order to circumvent allegations of occultism, ultimately faced a dark fate. In a 1499 letter, Trithemius disclosed to his friend Arnold Bost, a Carmelite monk from Ghent, the composition of a handbook, as Noel Brann summarised, on « steganography, that is, the art of writing secret messages and communicating them long distances by occult means ». ⁴¹ Regrettably the letter was intercepted by the prior of the Carmelite convent, who accused Trithemius of engaging in black magic. This accusation, compounded by grievances raised by fellow monks regarding alleged mismanagement, led to Trithemius's expulsion from the Abbey of Sponheim and the loss of the library he had meticulously curated there, effectively barring him from publishing the handbook. A similar allegation was made one decade later by Charles de Bovelles, who had previously visited the abbot and perused some chapters of the work. The scandal was revisited in a 1509 letter to Germain de Ganay, in which Bovelles denounced *Steganographia* as promoting black magic. As a consequence, the work was not printed until 1606, at which point it was swiftly included in the *Index librorum prohibitorum*. ⁴²

The first two books of the *Steganographia* described cipher systems disguised as magical prayers to demons, containing coded messages arranged by Trithemius using techniques that replaced letters with other letters or numbers. The third book, unfinished at the time of his death, hypothesised telepathic communication via seven planetary spirits, invoking subordinate intelligences to deliver messages to absent addressees within twenty-four hours. This supernatural method, which was revealed in the intercepted letter to Arnold Bost, was said to have been discovered by Trithemius through an unidentified philosopher called *Menastor*, whose encrypted name, as Arno Mentzel-Reuters claims, probably alludes to the *Picatrix*. ⁴³ The procedure described by the abbot was based on the invocation of angels and involved, as in sorcery, the use of talismans or astral images inscribed with symbols of the desired spirit. These procedures became established in the medieval grimoires of the so-called pseudo-Solomonic literature such as *Ars notoria*, *De officiis spirituum*, *Clavicula Salomonis*, *De quattuor annulis*, *Almandal*, and *Liber sacratus*. They described defined magical rituals that could include prayers, fumigation, exorcisms, and elaborate engravings in ancient languages such as

⁴¹ BRANN, *The Abbot Trithemius*, p. 19–20. For a detailed analysis of the *Steganographia*, see THOMAS ERNST, « Schwarzweiße Magie. Der Schlüssel zum dritten Buch der *Steganographia* des Trithemius », *Daphnis. Zeitschrift für Mittlere Deutsche Literatur*, 25 (1996), p. 1–205. See also WAYNE SHUMAKER, *Renaissance Curiosa*, Center for Medieval & Early Renaissance Studies, Binghamton – New York 1982, p. 91–131.

⁴² BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 85–91; ZAMBELLI, *White Magic*, p. 75–76, 84–85.

⁴³ TRITHEMIUS, *Steganographia*, III, *praefatio*, EX officina typographica Matthiae Beckeri, sumptibus Ioannis Berneri, Francofurti 1606, p. 160–161; see MENTZEL-REUTERS, « Serielle Chronographie », p. 390–391.

Greek, Latin, Hebrew or Arabic, and their purpose was to summon, command, or beseech demons.⁴⁴

According to the esoteric tradition Trithemius was following, this art promised extraordinary abilities, including instant mastery of multiple languages, enhanced memory, and comprehensive knowledge of the seven liberal arts. However, the misuse of such techniques could have led the uneducated practitioner to engage in illicit activities such as necromancy, including the use of curses reminiscent of ancient Roman *defixiones*, where harm was inflicted through inscribed lead or silver sheets, akin to voodoo.⁴⁵ The very same *Picatrix*, which Trithemius had decried as execrable and superstitious in his *Antipalus maleficiorum*, presented some details and methods for evoking the seven planetary spirits and crafting talismans for various purposes, such as that indicated in the *Steganographia*, namely secret communication with an absent individual.⁴⁶

Drawing on his sources, Trithemius elaborated an angelic catalogue that would form the central framework of his later interpretation of history. In the third book of the *Steganographia*, the exposition of the art was accompanied by numerological tables and lists, presented as calculations of the planets' positions in the sky. The planets and their corresponding ruling angels were then arranged according to their succession over 354 lunar years and 4 lunar months, thereby laying the foundation for a concise account of planetary history. This structure became the basis of the detailed chronology later set forth in the *De septem secundeis*. During the reign of Samael–Mars, the Great Flood occurred; under Gabriel–Moon, the confusion of languages took place; and during the reign of Michael–Sun, the Exodus from Egypt unfolded. By applying this explanatory principle, Trithemius asserted, anyone could calculate and even anticipate future events pertinent to their own era.⁴⁷

Similarly, in the preface to the sixth book of *Polygraphia*, Trithemius elaborated on the angelic-planetary sequence, connecting it to a broader reflection on the origins of human language and the evolution of communication. He outlined a 'poetic' chronology inherited from antiquity, according to which humans

⁴⁴ For an overview on the pseudo-Solomonic magical texts, see JULIEN VÉRONÈSE, « La transmission groupée des textes de magie 'salomonienne' de l'Antiquité au Moyen Âge », in STÉPHAN GIOANNI, BENOÎT GRÉVIN (eds.), *L'Antiquité tardive dans les collections médiévales. Textes et représentations, VI^e-XIV^e siècle*, École française de Rome, Roma 2008, p. 193–223; ID., « Solomonic magic », in SOPHIE PAGE, CATHERINE RIDER (eds.), *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, Routledge, London – New York 2019, p. 187–200; ILARIA PARRI, *La magia nel Medioevo*, Carocci, Roma 2018, p. 54–67.

⁴⁵ BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 84–85. On the ancient Roman *defixiones*, see FRITZ GRAF, *La Magie dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1994.

⁴⁶ TRITHEMIUS, *Antipalus maleficiorum*, I, ch. 2, in ZAMBELLI, *White Magic*, p. 103.

⁴⁷ TRITHEMIUS, *Steganographia*, III, *praefatio*, p. 163, in particular: « Et quidem si quis assertioni praefatae adhibet fidem, per semet ab origine mundi facile mutationes temporum, et gubernationem angelorum usque ad suam aetatem praescripto ordine poterit supputare ».

remained entirely illiterate for 1,063 years – spanning the first three celestial regimes (Orifiel–Saturn, Anael–Venus, and Zachariel–Jupiter) – relying instead on animal sounds or cave drawings to convey meaning. Each planetary ruler influenced civilization in distinct ways: Orifiel–Saturn promoted agriculture and city-building while keeping humanity in ignorance and servitude; Anael–Venus fostered culture and craftsmanship but also encouraged sensuality and indulgence, introducing leisure activities such as music and games; and Zachariel–Jupiter advanced hunting and settlement skills while instilling ambition, domination, and moral awareness. The sequence culminated with the reign of Raphael–Mercury, marked by the invention of writing – initially in pictographic symbols akin to hieroglyphs, later refined into alphabets, reflecting humanity’s dispersion across the world. Trithemius concluded that through the written word, ancient poets transmitted concealed and esoteric teachings, embedding hidden wisdom within their narratives.⁴⁸

V. Loopholes of Human Freedom

The mysterious content of the third book of *Steganographia*, which was deciphered only in the late 1990s, revealed it to be a ‘rational’ treatise despite its esoteric appearance. The strictly cryptographic nature of the writing was demonstrated by scholars such as Thomas Ernst and Jim Reed, who explained how Trithemius employed numerical ciphers linked to angelic invocations. In particular, he devised numerical cryptography systems, replacing letters with numbers to generate multiple encrypted alphabets. Deciphering the spells revealed that the invocation formulas concealed simple coded messages, constructed using numerical tables where each angel’s name corresponded to a different alphabet. The key revelation lay in demystifying the *Steganographia*: there was nothing magical about it. The witchcraft formulas and demonic prayers were merely decorative or sacralised embellishments – magical-religious disguises for a purely rational cryptographic system.⁴⁹ Consequently, it can be assumed that further research might substantiate the hypothesis that *De septem secundeis* may also contain cryptographic layers, despite the absence of explicit decoding tables – a feature that differentiates it from the *Steganographia*.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ TRITHEMIUS, *Polygraphiae libri sex*, Impressum ductu Ioannis Haselberg de Aia, [Basel?] 1518, fol. PVV–r. For a comprehensive examination of this work, see MAXIMILIAN GAMER, *Die Polygraphia des Johannes Trithemius nach der handschriftlichen Fassung. Edition, Übersetzung und Kommentar*, 2 vols., Brill, Leiden – Boston 2022.

⁴⁹ JIM REEDS, « Solved: The Ciphers in Book III of Trithemius’s *Steganographia* », *Cryptologia*, 22/4 (1998), p. 291–317; ERNST, « The Numerical–astrological Ciphers in the Third Book of Trithemius’s *Steganographia* », *Cryptologia*, 22/4 (1998), p. 318–341.

⁵⁰ MENTZEL–REUTERS, « Serielle Chronographie », p. 388, 393.

In any case, rather than following traditional salvation history, Trithemius mapped world history onto the catalogue of biblical archangels, formulating a distinctive chronology dissimilar from conventional universal chronicles. Earlier chronologies, from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages – such as Eusebius of Caesarea's *Chronica*, Orosius's *Historiarum adversus paganos libri septem*, or Bede the Venerable's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* – were constructed by cross-referencing the temporal frameworks provided by the Bible with the chronological systems employed by pagans, including the succession of Olympiads, the founding date of Rome, the sequence of consuls or emperors, and similar markers. These calculations identified historical epochs on the basis of key events, ultimately serving to date the birth of Christ with precision, which was in turn adopted as the reference point for distinguishing the Christian eras. Trithemius, however, focused on counting years in fixed sequences in his *De septem secundeis*, as Mentzel-Reuters effectively explained. Stripped of angelic rulers – whom, notably, he never taught the reader how to summon in this writing – his framework reveals itself as a serial division of history into equal periods, aimed at a rational calculation of time.⁵¹ Yet, he carefully preserved history's theological foundation, maintaining an esoteric superstructure without veering into superstitious practices like the *ars notoria*.

Furthermore, Trithemius's astral-based chronology raises philosophical questions that extend its interpretation beyond the purely cryptographic or historiographical domain. Trithemius explicitly addressed the core issue of his system, discussing the relationship between celestial influence and free will. In this context, it becomes essential to ascertain the precise nature and limitations of astral causality within the theoretical framework devised by the abbot. His conceptualization of astral causation encompassed two foundational sources, which proved instrumental in facilitating his philosophical understanding of history. Trithemius's astrological vision was chiefly informed by the *Speculum astronomiae*, which he attributed to his revered Albertus Magnus, and by Peter of Abano's *Conciliator differentiarum philosophorum et medicorum*, which he explicitly recalled in the opening sentences of the *De septem secundeis*. Both works sought to reconcile astrology with Christian scholarship, emphasizing the secondary role of astral influences under divine providence. For this reason, it is essential to examine those sections of both works that most significantly contributed to providing a philosophical foundation for Trithemius's esoteric historiography.

Being structured into seventeen chapters and divided into two main sections, the *Speculum*, in particular, presented both a general introduction to astrological methods and a defense of their valuable utilisation. Primary objective of this XIII century survey of astrological literature was to identify the licit and illicit practice

⁵¹ MENTZEL-REUTERS, « Serielle Chronographie », p. 389.

of astral based prognostication. The first section outlined the fundamental divisions of this disputed discipline, distinguishing between two notions of ‘astronomy’, the one understood as the mathematical study of skies and celestial motions, and the other as « the science of the judgements of the stars, which provides a link between natural philosophy and metaphysics » (« scientia iudiciorum astrorum, quae est ligamentum naturalis philosophiae et metaphysicae »).⁵² According to the *Speculum*, astrology is defended as a legitimate *scientia media* mediating between metaphysics and natural philosophy, insofar as it enables indirect knowledge of God through the heavens and the celestial bodies, which function as secondary causes of the divine will. Far from being a superstition, astrology is conceived as a rational investigation of celestial causality that grants privileged access to the ordered structure of the cosmos. Consequently, the science of the stars is valued not merely for its predictive capacities, but above all for its ability to guide human reason towards knowledge and love of God through contemplating the harmonious order of the universe.⁵³

The second section examined the technical aspects of astrology, categorizing its various branches – such as the revolution of the year according to planetary conjunctions within a zodiac sign, the doctrine of nativities according to the horoscope, and the foundation of electional astrology – and scrutinizing their legitimacy. While astrology’s application in medicine, agriculture, and navigation was considered permissible, practices such as necromancy, talismanic magic, and demonic divinatory arts, as described in the pseudo-Hermetic and pseudo-Solomonic literature, were rejected as distortions of legitimate astrological knowledge.

In chapters 12–14, the *Speculum* addresses the philosophical challenges raised by the seemingly deterministic character of astral causality by arguing that celestial influence operates according to the (Neoplatonic–Hermetic) principle that higher beings act upon lower ones. Human beings, however, are not entirely subject to this cosmic order, insofar as it ultimately depends on God’s will, which preserves the universal structure until the end of time. This prompts the fundamental question of the extent to which human freedom and free will can be

⁵² [Ps.–?]ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Speculum astronomiae*, in PAOLA ZAMBELLI, *The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma. Astrology, Theology and Science in Albertus Magnus and his Contemporaries*, Springer, Dordrecht 1992, p. 209–213, 219–220. On the controversy over the attribution of the work to Albertus Magnus, see AGOSTINO PARAVICINI BAGLIANI, *Le ‘Speculum Astronomiae’, une énigme? Enquête sur les manuscrits*, SISMELE–Edizioni del Galluzzo, Firenze 2001; ORNELLA POMPEO FARACOVÌ, « Un testo periodizzante: lo *Speculum astronomiae* », *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, 9/2 (2009), p. 497–501. In what follows, without engaging in the broader scholarly debate, the *Speculum* will be regarded as Trithemius himself understood it – that is, as a work authored by Albertus Magnus.

⁵³ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Speculum astronomiae*, p. 221.

accommodated within this theoretical framework.⁵⁴ The *Speculum* maintains that human freedom consists in the capacity to anticipate and respond to celestial influences. In chapter 13, devoted to nativities, Albertus Magnus argues that every sublunary entity is subject to stellar influence in accordance with its inherent nature and its capacity to receive such influence, which in turn determines the effects it can produce. Since no entity can generate effects contrary to its own nature, human freedom resides in the ability to foresee how astral forces shape one's disposition and to regulate one's actions accordingly, without negating celestial causality.⁵⁵ In this way, free will is exercised within the context of astral determinism by modulating the degree to which planetary influences affect human nature: while astral forces themselves remain immutable, their effects can be moderated, thus preserving a space for freedom within a divinely ordained cosmos.⁵⁶

In chapter 14, the *Speculum* further examines the compatibility of astrological interrogation with human free will. Albertus Magnus argues that inquiries concerning future events are marked by varying degrees of uncertainty, especially when they involve outcomes influenced by human choice. By contrast, events that lie beyond individual control are more susceptible to reliable prediction.⁵⁷ Within this framework, astrological interrogation is not presented as a threat to free will, but rather as a means of informing and guiding human deliberation. The *Speculum* maintains that astrological judgments do not impose necessity upon future events; instead, they disclose the most probable outcomes given specific celestial configurations. Future contingents therefore remain genuinely open, retaining the capacity both to occur and not to occur until they are actualised, at which point they assume necessity. This position aligns with the Aristotelian distinction between absolute and conditional necessity, according to which an event is not necessary in itself but becomes necessary once it has taken place. By adopting this perspective, Albertus Magnus seeks to reconcile astrological prediction with

⁵⁴ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Speculum astronomiae*, p. 257: « For if an earthquake and a flood, or fires – as far as rich men and all the common people are concerned – war or peace, famine and death, as well as the appearance of some great prophet or heretic, or the rising of a horrible universal or particular schism are indicated by the figure of the revolution of the year, or of an eclipse, or of a conjunction (which signifies a [religious] sect) in accordance with that for which God, the most high, has provided, what has that to do with free will? Is it in a man's power to change such things? ».

⁵⁵ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Speculum astronomiae*, p. 259.

⁵⁶ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Speculum astronomiae*, p. 261: « But how should one respond to those questions concerning the character of the soul, except [by saying] that the native is not judged to be chaste or impure, wrathful or patient, and so on save according to his aptitude or lack of aptitude? Hence, nonetheless, he chooses this or that [conduct]. But it belongs to the operation of the heavens whether he is inclined more readily towards choosing that for which he has an aptitude ».

⁵⁷ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Speculum astronomiae*, p. 261–263.

contingency, affirming that potentiality is not inevitably actualised, yet when it is, it unfolds according to a necessary causal order.⁵⁸

As a consequence, astrological prognostication no more negates free will than does divine providence. The supposition that God, in His eternal knowledge, foresees human choices and might have inscribed them in the *liber universitatis* (the 'book of the universe') is granted; nevertheless, the heavens do not disclose the entirety of what is contained within the divine intellect, for they remain subordinate to ineffable divine providence. Accordingly, when astrological indications prove ambiguous, such opacity signifies that God has chosen to withhold that particular truth. On these grounds, Albertus Magnus defended astrological interrogations by maintaining that they do not abolish free will, but rather serve as a guide for human deliberation. The stars do not cause events; they signify them, and their influence upon the sublunary realm may be moderated through human agency. More generally, the problem of determinism in astrology mirrors that of divine providence: just as God's foreknowledge does not constrain human choices, so astrological predictions indicate probable outcomes without imposing necessity.⁵⁹

The restriction of human freedom to the sphere of the rational prediction of effects announced by celestial configurations, as articulated in the *Speculum*, met with Trithemius's sustained theoretical opposition. A rigid adherence to astral causation theory – according to which all events in the sublunary world are determined by the configuration of the celestial bodies – would ultimately undermine both Christian faith and human responsibility for sin. As Trithemius explicitly stated in a 1487 letter to Nicholas von Merneck, the concept of fate is no consequence, and evil actions do not originate from constellations but are the result of human free will. Should Christians accept belief in fate, as the pagans once did, they would thereby deny both free will and divine grace. Every sin,

⁵⁸ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Speculum astronomiae*, p. 265.

⁵⁹ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Speculum astronomiae*, p. 265–267: « And perhaps, someone considering [this matter] more closely, will have the same uncertainty or one similar in kind to that uncertainty which concerns divine providence; since in those things which God operates by means of the heavens, the indication of heaven is nothing other than divine providence. In those things, indeed, which we initiate, nothing prevents [the fact] that there is also not a cause in heaven, but a signification. For of the two sides of a dilemma from which man can choose one or the other, God knew from eternity which of these he [i.e.: the man] would choose. For which reason, in the book of the universe, which is the vellum of heaven [...]. He was able to configure, if He wished, what He knew; [but] if He did this, then the compatibility of free will with divine providence or with the indication of an interrogation is the same. Therefore, if it cannot be denied that divine providence co-exists with free will, it cannot be denied that the profession of interrogations co-exists with it as well ».

therefore, proceeds exclusively from the human will, and whatever is not voluntary cannot properly be regarded as sin.⁶⁰

Were a deterministic framework to be accepted, human beings – like all other natural entities – would be entirely subject, in both body and soul, to the prescriptions dictated by the intelligences governing the seven planets. However, Trithemius, drawing on Neoplatonic psychology to safeguard Christian truth, appealed to the highest part of the soul, which transcends reason (*ratio*), as a means of overcoming the linear transmission of effects through celestial causes. The mind (*mens*), conceived as the divine substance within human nature and the faculty that elevates the soul to the contemplation of truth, possesses the capacity to liberate itself from the angelic-planetary order, operating beyond the physical laws imposed upon human nature by the stars.

In his *De septem secundeis*, Trithemius asserted the complete independence of the spiritual domain from astral prescription. Moreover, his conception of *magia naturalis* as a form of wisdom that draws the soul closer to the divine is predicated on the autonomy of human intellectual faculties, which are not subject to the dictates of the stars. The human mind is envisaged as the receptacle of divine truth, its essential substance derived from a transcendent principle, thereby endowing it with a share in divine power. This Neoplatonic theory, which is rooted in Ficino's *Theologia Platonica* and Plotin's concept of 'undescended soul', was referred to by Trithemius as the « invisible fruits of the soul » (« invisibiles fructus animae ») of natural magic in his correspondence to Joachim of Brandenburg.⁶¹ In this context, human participation in the divine plan for salvation is not determined by astral harmony, nor do the stars govern human foresight or decision-making. As articulated in the *De septem secundeis*, celestial movements may exert an influence over the physical body and its functions; however, they are incapable of exerting authority over the mind, which remains free and self-sufficient – provided it does not capitulate to bodily influences. Concurrently, the

⁶⁰ TRITHEMIUS, *Opera pia et spiritualia...*, Moguntiae, Ex typographeo Ioan[nis] Albini 1605, p. 954–955: « Quicumque putat fatum esse aliquid, quicumque dies observat et menses, quicumque genesim credit dominari in hominibus, non Christianus, sed paganus est, quoniam et superstitionibus inservit, gratiam Dei negat, et liberum tollit arbitrium. Fatum enim nihil est, et nullum ad peccandum constellatio provocat, minus compellit. [...] Cave autem, ne putes constellationes in hominibus aliquid posse efficere, sed voluntatem hominis causam scito peccati, quoniam omne peccatum volutarium est; quod vero non fuerit volutarium, nec erit peccatum ».

⁶¹ TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 105: « Magia siquidem naturalis non solum effectus operatur visibiles, sed etiam intellectum ipsius hominis in ea periti mirabiliter in cognitione divinitatis illuminat, invisibilesque fructus animae praestat ». On the tripartite division of the soul into *mens*, *ratio* and *idolum*, see MARSILIO FICINO, *Platonic Theology* XIII, transl. MICHAEL J.B. ALLEN, ed. JAMES HANKINS, 6 vols., Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2004, vol. IV, p. 204. On Plotinus's theory, see RICCARDO CHIARADONNA, « La dottrina dell'anima non discesa in Plotino e la conoscenza degli intelligibili », in EUGENIO CANONE (ed.), *Per una storia del concetto di mente*, Leo S. Olschki, Firenze 2005, p. 27–49;

seven governing angels do not in any way subvert the natural order through their influence on sublunar beings.⁶²

The emphasis on the supremacy of the mind reiterated a pivotal argument advanced by Trithemius in his letter to Ganay, in which he both proclaimed the autonomy of the intellectual faculty from celestial configurations, and articulated, in terms of divine wisdom and human freedom and self-determination, the metaphysical preeminence of the mind. Immune to astral influence, nourished by faith in Providence, and strengthened by the divine dispensation of truth, the mind stands beyond the reach of celestial forces, thus challenging the astrologers' claims to predictive authority. The epistemological distinction between a material (astral-based) and a spiritual (religion-based) causation, permits natural magic – whose legitimate use is granted by God – to enable human beings to be empowered to exercise extraordinary virtues that transcend their own bodily nature, as well as to perform wonders and miracles beyond the scope of astral prescription:

For the stellar harmony has neither produced nor influenced the mind. A certain lover of the occult [*philocryphus*] said thus: « Whoever was aware of the state of celestial harmony would know both the past and the future ». But who can ever introduce me to one person in a thousand who understands this celestial harmony? The mind is born for supercelestial harmony, in whose likeness it lives. The stars do not understand, nor do they even feel anything, so they do not impart wisdom to our minds, nor do they have any dominion over us, who walk in the Spirit, confessing the Lord Jesus Christ, who has all things in His power, to whose likeness we must faithfully conform ourselves according to our strength. For He is the wisdom of God the Father, He is the source and origin of science, He is the centre through whom all things were made. Let vain and reckless men, lying astrologers who deceive minds and speak frivolous things, stay away. The disposition of the stars does not affect the immortal mind, the natural science, and the supercelestial wisdom, but the body only exercises its own dominion over the body. The mind is free, it is not subject to the stars, nor is it under their influence, nor does it follow their movement, but it only participates in the supercelestial principle, from which it was made and from which it is fecundated.⁶³

⁶² TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 38: « Mutantur enim hominum cum tempore mores, et corpora inferiora secundum influentiam superiorum disponuntur. Mens quidem libera est, et influentiam astrorum non suscipit, nisi prae nimio, quod cum corpore habet, commercio se inclinando affectum commaculet suum. Angeli enim, qui motores sunt orbium, nihil eorum, quae natura constituit, destruunt, vel subvertunt ».

⁶³ TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 74–75: « Stellaris enim harmonia mentem nec dedit nec influit. Quidam philocryphus dicebat sic: 'Quicumque conditionem coelestis harmoniae notam haberet, tam praeterita quam futura cognosceret.' Quis autem mihi dabitur ex millibus unus, qui harmoniam hanc intelligat coelestem? Ad supercoelestem mens nata est, cuius similitudine vivit. Astra nihil intelligunt, nec sentiunt quidem, unde nec sapientiam menti nostrae conferunt, nec

The exaltation of the mind over reason, understood as the precise calculation of astral influences, together with the recognition of the individual soul – fortified by faith – as the central agent in attaining both physical and metaphysical knowledge, did not imply a wholesale rejection of astrology. Trithemius himself acknowledged its legitimacy within the contentious sphere of ‘world astrology.’ Yet he confined its objective validity to the material realm, conceding the susceptibility of sublunar beings to the influence of celestial bodies. This attempt, however, to reconcile astral causality with free will does not, upon closer scrutiny, resolve the theoretical aporia inherent in endorsing astrology’s prognosticative methods. If the human being is free as soul yet constrained as body, to what extent, then, do the stars govern the fate of humanity as a whole, given their purported sway over the course of history?

VI. Cursed Conjunctions

Trithemius’s conception of astral causality drew upon Peter of Abano’s *Conciliator differentiarum philosophorum et precipue medicorum*, explicitly cited at the outset of *De septem secundeis*. His framework for classifying historical events was based on the *differentia* 9 of that work, in which Peter applied astrological knowledge to historical inquiry. Among the 210 *differentiae* comprising this influential 1303 treatise – grounded in Aristotelian cosmology and Ptolemaic astrology and aimed at reconciling conflicting views between philosophers and physicians – the *differentia* 9 addressed the question of whether human nature had advanced or declined over time, and whether the notion of a diminution in human longevity, now comparatively brief when measured against that of former generations and corroborated by scriptural accounts in *Genesis*, could be substantiated or rejected (*Utrum natura humana sit debilitata ab eo quod antiquitus necne*). Peter’s argument was structured into four demonstrations—corresponding to the four *propter* sections into which the chapter is divided—each designed to harmonise the divergent opinions of esteemed authorities.

In this context, Trithemius’s primary focus elaborated on the section entitled *propter tertium*, which addressed the question of the changing human lifetime span from the perspectives of astronomy, philosophy, and medicine. Of particular note

aliquod in nos dominium habent, qui spiritu ambulamus, confitentes Dominum Iesum Christum, omnia in sua potestate habentem, ad cuius similitudinem pro viribus fideliter oportet conformare. Ipse est enim sapientia Dei patris, ipse est fons et origo scientiae, ipse est centrum, per quem facta sunt omnia. Abeant homines temerarii, homines vani, et mendaces astrologi, deceptores mentium, et frivola garrientes. Nihil enim ad mentem immortalem, nihil ad scientiam naturalem, nihil facit ad sapientiam supercoelestem stellarum dispositio, sed corpus in corpus dumtaxat suum habet imperium. Mens est libera, nec stellis subiicitur, nec earum influentias concipit, nec motum sequitur, sed supercoelesti principio, a quo et facta est et facundatur, tantum communicat ». See BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 128–129.

is the astronomical explanation, which is further divided into three additional sections. Peter established different types of astral causality, proceeding methodically from a general to a specific standpoint. In the first section, he conducted an examination of the fixed stars within the eighth sphere, in addition to the constellations that constitute the zodiac signs. His reasoning was grounded in the medieval cosmological model of concentric celestial spheres, particularly the motion of the fixed stars (eighth sphere) and the precession of the equinoxes. According to Peter, when the cardinal points of the zodiac (Aries, Cancer, Libra, Capricorn) were perfectly aligned with their corresponding signs in the fixed zodiac, the transmission of celestial virtue to the sublunary world was more direct and efficacious. As this alignment has progressively diminished, due to cosmic cycles, the influence of the heavens upon human generation and temperament has weakened. However, since these motions are cyclical, future realignments may restore more favorable conditions for human vitality. This investigation resulted in the formulation of a causal structure, whereby higher entities are believed to impart a simple, homogeneous, and immaterial influence upon the lower ones which, in turn, are considered to be intermediate entities responsible for the conversion and transmission of these influences.⁶⁴

Following such a theory, Peter transitioned to the second case, which focuses on intermediate causality stemming from planetary influences, particularly their conjunctions (small, medium, or great, especially those involving Saturn and Jupiter in the Aries every 960 years) and solar and lunar eclipses. These celestial events, depending on their quality and zodiacal position, are said to directly influence not only human health and longevity but also political regimes, religious movements, and the rise of prophetic figures. As a consequence, he asserted that the movements of the seven planets govern all transformations in the sublunary realm. For instance, while eclipses are known to signal climatic or geological changes, it is asserted that planetary conjunctions shape the destinies of kingdoms and religions by presiding over the births of miraculous individuals, namely rulers and prophets such as Nebuchadnezzar, Moses, Alexander the Great, Jesus, and Muhammad.⁶⁵ As Bruno Nardi has emphasised, Peter of Abano's causation pattern

⁶⁴ All references to the *Conciliator* are taken from the edition published in Venice by the Giunti printers in 1565: see PETRUS ABANUS PATAVINUS, *Conciliator controversiarum, quae inter philosophos et medicos versantur*, apud Iuntas, Venetiis 1565, fol. 14r–15v.

⁶⁵ PETRUS ABANUS, *Conciliator*, fol. 15v, in particular: « Secunda quidem causa astrologica sumitur ex planetis, et maxime ex coniunctionibus Saturni et Iovis, et solaribus eclipsibus et lunaribus, utcumque: ex coniunctione namque Saturni et Iovis in principio Arietis, quod quidem circa finem 960 contingit annorum, tunc enim secundum ascendens coniunctionis et dominium eius, secundum etiam locus coniunctionis eorum ex domibus, aut secundum fortunas vel infortunas locum ascendentis et coniunctionis aspicientes, variatur non solum natura humana fortitudine aut debilitate, longaevitate aut e contrario: immo et totus mundus inferior commutatur, ita non

is predicated on the notion that the influence of celestial bodies extends beyond strict physical phenomena, encompassing both the physiological constitution and the moral inclinations of body and soul. Concurrently, the seven planets are believed to exercise a distinct influence over specific phases of human life, with each planet presiding over a particular domain of human activity. Even extraordinary occurrences adhere, to a certain degree, to this cosmic order. However, according to Peter, despite being foretold by celestial conjunctions, such events, nevertheless, retain their miraculous nature.⁶⁶

The final case concerned the planets as specific causes of historical events. This doctrine was attributed to Abraham ibn Ezra, an erudite Jewish polymath of the twelfth century in Spain, renowned as a poet, mathematician, and biblical exegete. As Graziella Federici Vescovini has shown, Peter of Abano, who translated some of ibn Ezra's astronomical treatises, erroneously conflated him with Averroes in the *differentia* 9.⁶⁷ But in his *Liber rationum*, ibn Ezra had already delineated the historical pattern that subsequently was to be adopted by Trithemius, through the *Conciliator*, in his *De septem secundeis*: the seven archangels, each governing the motions of one of the seven planets, took turns ruling the sublunary world for cycles of 354 years and four lunar months. The planets under their command marked key biblical events – during Mars's reign, the Great Flood occurred, foretold by a planetary conjunction in Pisces; under the Moon's rule, the confusion of languages, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Exodus from Egypt took place.⁶⁸ While elaborating on ibn Ezra's views, Peter concluded his argument

solum regna, sed et leges, et prophetae consurgunt in mundo significative saltem, seu causaliter in quibusdam volentes prioribus quam neglectis reliquis condere, sicut apparuit in adventu Nabuchodonosor, Moysi, Alexandri Magni, Nazarei, Machometi ».

⁶⁶ BRUNO NARDI, *Saggi sull'aristotelismo padovano. Dal secolo XIV al XVI*, Sansoni, Firenze 1958, p. 32–35.

⁶⁷ PETRUS ABANUS, *Conciliator*, fol. 15v: « Est autem 3 causa huius considerationis ex planetis accepta secundum quod eis debetur quoddam regimen commune in mundo, quo unusquisque sua maneria mundum habet gubernare potissime per intelligentiam sibi secundum Aver[roem] in tract[at]u De substantia orbis virtute copulatam et si substantia extra consistat. Huius autem intelligentia est septenaria secundum numerum 7 planetarum, seu intelligentia, seu angeli dicantur. Nam prima quidem est Satur[us] Cassiel, secunda Iovis Sachiël, tertia Martis Samael, quarta Solis Michael, quinta Veneris Anael, sexta Mercurii Raphael, septima vero Lunae Gabriel. Ordo autem in ducatu eorum existit, quoniam primo Satur[us], deinde Venus, postea Iup[iter], deinceps Mercu[rius], postea Mars, deinde Luna, demum Sol. Ducatus autem et regimen uniuscuiusque est 354 annorum, et quatuor mensium lunarium ad similitudinem anni lunaris continentis ». See GRAZIELLA FEDERICI VESCOVINI, « La versio latina degli *Excerpta de secretis Albumasar di Sadan*. Una edizione », *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge*, 65 (1998), p. 283, note 32.

⁶⁸ ABRAHAM IBN EZRA, *Liber rationum*, in *Abrahe Auenaris Judei Astrologi peritissimi in re iudiciali opera...*, Ex officina Petri Liechtenstein, Venetiis 1507, fol. L3v (*De gubernatoribus mundi*): « Cassiel, Satkiel, Samael, Michael, Anael, Raphael, Gauriel sunt quoque septem angeli secundum septem planetas. Quorum quilibet ducit mundus 354 annis, 4 mensibus, numero dierum Lunae. Et inceperunt

by addressing planetary influence within the sole human sphere. The variability of human nature, and its improvement or decline, was thus determined by the different effects of each planet, which depended not only on its inherent qualities, but also on its celestial position, its angular relations with other planets, and its conjunctions. Consequently, human history unfolded according to such universal astral conditions.

As demonstrated, in the *differentia* 9, Peter revisited a contentious issue of medieval astrological debate, also explored by Albertus Magnus in the *Speculum*'s chapter on revolutions: the validity of world astrology, grounded in the theory of the 120 planetary conjunctions, especially the great conjunctions of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars within a specific zodiacal sign. The prognostication of global events extended the methods of individual horoscopes – judicial astrology – to humanity as a whole, deemed a privileged object of astral causality. By examining planetary conjunctions, along with extraordinary phenomena such as eclipses, astrologers attempted to chart the world's horoscope, predicting natural disasters or political-religious upheavals. This doctrine, which the *Speculum* endorsed as a natural science, traced back to Arab thinkers such as Māshā'allāh and al-Kindī, although its classical formulation found definitive expression in Albumasar's *De magnis coniunctionibus* – written between 861–866, translated by John of Seville in the twelfth century, but published in Augsburg only in 1489. Albumasar's astrological conception of cosmic order, based on planetary conjunctions which recur on a cyclical basis, aligned with Plato's *Timaeus* (38b–39d), wherein the theory of the Great Year posits the periodic return of all planets to the same degree in the sky, suggesting catastrophic cosmic cycles. As a result, this notion aroused religious and metaphysical anxieties in Jewish and Christian culture, particularly

secundum modum quem dicam. Sa.[turnus], Venus, Iupiter, Mer.[curius], Mars, Luna, Sol. Saturnus autem praecessit, quum Sol et Luna fuerunt creati in principio horae. Sa.[turnus] duxit mundum 354 annis et 3 parte anni. Deinde Venus, et postea alii. Ita qui reditione constituunt circulum. Invenies quoque per istum numerum Martem servire tempori diluvii, et Lunam quando linguae fuerunt divisae. Et in mutatione Sdom [Sesom, *ed.*], id est Sodomae, et exitus Aegypti, qui fuit anno 2400 ac 48 annis adde, fuit gubernator Sol. Cum autem templum fuit destructus, primo fuit anno 3338, ducebat tunc Iupiter. Cuius tempore fuit perfectus templum secundo. Et in destructione secunda fuit Mercurius anno 3828. Et cum fuerunt completi 4708 anni, incepit Sol ducere. Et eius Michael princeps, sicut scriptum est tempore Ys[r]ael. Illo tempore stabit Michael, noster princeps in Daniele ». See PETRUS ABANUS, *Conciliator*, fol. 15v: « [...] cum Mars mundum gubernaret, factum est diluvium propter coniunctionem maxime planetarum in Piscibus. Sub ducatum autem Lunae dispartitae sunt linguae, subversa est Sodoma, et multa alia apparuerunt iudicia secundum naturas, et proprietates ducatum planetarum ». On the use of Ibn Ezra's writings by Pietro d'Abano, see SHLOMO SELA, « Pietro d'Abano, Translator of Abraham Ibn Ezra's Astrological Writings », *Sefarad*, 79/1 (2019), p. 7–87, in particular p. 45–46.

with regard to the prophesied Antichrist and the apocalyptic end of the world heralded by celestial signs.⁶⁹

A sensitive aspect of the doctrine, vehemently opposed by Pico della Mirandola in his *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*, was the so-called ‘horoscope of religions,’ which applied individual astrological principles to major historical-religious shifts, suggesting that religions, like natural phenomena, followed a predetermined rise and fall dictated by planetary cycles. Philosophers such as Albumasar, Roger Bacon, Pierre d’Ailly, and Pietro Pomponazzi explored the possibility of the *mutatio legum* understood as the calculation of a religion’s duration and its eventual transition. For instance, Albumasar associated specific Jupiter conjunctions with the emergence of known religious beliefs: when conjoined with Saturn, it indicates Judaism; with Mars, the worship of stars and idols; with Venus, Islam; with Mercury, Christianity; and with the Moon, it signifies doubt, instability, or atheism, due to the Moon’s rapid motion and inherent mutability. In the same way, Roger Bacon, drawing on the work of Albumasar, developed this scheme and associated the conjunction Jupiter–Sun with Egyptian polytheism, Jupiter–Mars with Chaldean religion, Jupiter–Saturn with Judaism, Jupiter–Mercury with Christianity, Jupiter–Venus with Islam, and finally, the Jupiter–Moon conjunction, which ominously foretells the Antichrist’s advent and the decline of Christianity.⁷⁰

This synthesis of astronomical calculation, religious prophecy and astral determinism posed a profound challenge to traditional religious authorities, as

⁶⁹ VON BEZOLD, « Astrologische Geschichtskonstruktion », p. 31–33; BOLL, BEZOLD, GUNDEL, *Stern Glaube und Sterndeutung*, p. 29–44; EUGENIO GARIN, *Lo zodiaco della vita*, Laterza, Bari 1976, p. 1–30; PAOLA ZAMBELLI, « Introduction: Astrologers’ Theory of History », in EAD. (ed.): *‘Astrologi hallucinati’: Stars and the End of the World in Luther’s Time*, de Gruyter, Berlin – New York 1986, p. 1–28; MARCO BERTOZZI, « Il fatale ritmo della storia. La teoria delle grandi congiunzioni astrali tra XV e XVI secolo », *I Castelli di Yale*, 1/1 (1996), p. 29–49; GRAZIELLA FEDERICI VESCOVINI, *Medioevo magico. La magia tra religione e scienza nei secoli XIII e XIV*, UTET, Torino 2008, p. 225–275.

⁷⁰ On the horoscope of religions, see VON BEZOLD, « Astrologische Geschichtskonstruktion », p. 35, 38–41; BERTOZZI, *Il fatale ritmo della storia*, p. 31–34; FEDERICI VESCOVINI, *Medioevo magico* p. 247–248; EAD., « The Theological Debate », in BRENDAN DOOLEY (ed.), *A Companion to Astrology in the Renaissance*, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2014, p. 99–140. On the horoscopes provided by Albumasar and Bacon, see ALBUMASAR, *De magnis coniunctionibus*, tract. I, diff. III, Erhardius Ratdolt, Augustae Vindelicorum, 1489, fol. B2v–B3v; Abū Ma’sar on *Historical Astrology: the Book of Religions and Dynasties, On the Great Conjunctions*, vol. II: *The Latin Versions*, ed. and transl. KEIJI YAMAMOTO, CHARLES BURNETT, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2000, p. 23–27; ROGER BACON, *Opus Majus*, ed. JOHN HENRY BRIDGES, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1897–1900, vol. I, p. 225–226. On Pico and astrology, see OVANES AKOPYAN, *Debating the Stars in the Italian Renaissance. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem and Its Reception*, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2021. It is also noteworthy that in the sixteenth century, Girolamo Cardano employed his astrological expertise in the same branch of study to substantiate the Gospel’s account by providing the horoscope of Christ. See GIROLAMO CARDANO, *La natività del Salvatore e l’astrologia mondiale*, ed. ORNELLA POMPEO FARACOVÌ, Mimesis, Milano 2002.

world astrology undermined biblical truth and relegated Christian eschatology and its promise of salvation to a mere episode in the universal cycle, ultimately destined to end with the next conjunction. By reducing sacred history to a predictable sequence of planetary configurations, this doctrine risked collapsing divine providence into cosmic necessity, thereby casting doubt on the uniqueness of Christian revelation. Therefore, such a worldview threatened to replace faith with fatalism and undermined the very foundation of the theological concepts of freedom and grace.

VII. Casting Risky Horoscopes

The *De septem secundeis* is an unusual example in the context of this astrological literature. It adopted the theoretical framework of world astrology as outlined by Peter of Abano, presenting a universal chronology based on planetary cycles and casting a horoscope of religions. Towards the end of his letter to the Emperor, Trithemius prophesied the decline of Christianity due to the rise of a new grand religious movement, which would erase all previous religions (« Secta religionis consurget magna, veterum destructio religionum »). However, Trithemius's adaptation of Peter's model diverged in crucial ways from both its declared source and the Arab astrological tradition. His cycles did not correspond to conjunctions but rather to fixed regencies where each spirit's influence peaks midway through its cycle, with residual effects extending into the next. Furthermore, Trithemius's historical account was based on the inherent qualities of both each planet and its ruling intelligence, while completely ignoring the position or distance of the planets from each other, as well as their relocation through the zodiac. From this perspective, Trithemius redrafted past events and predicted future developments. According to his overall pattern, the attributes of Samael–Mars or Zachariel–Jupiter could be understood as harbingers of imminent political and religious upheavals.⁷¹

In the third book of the earlier *Steganographia*, planetary spirits were described as angels that a magician could summon through rituals including prayers and incantations in order to transmit secret thoughts or messages to far-off people. However, modern scholars have deciphered such spells, thereby revealing the

⁷¹ TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 11–12: « Et notandum, quod veteres tradiderunt philosophi quoties Samael, spiritus Martis, rector est orbis, totiens monarchiae notabilis alteratio surgit. Religiones variantur et sectae, mutantur leges, principatusque ad extraneos transferuntur et regna, quod ex historiis per ordinem facile possumus invenire. Verum non statim a principio regiminis Samael hunc manifestat sui moris affectum, sed posteaquam gubernationis suae medium excesserit, quod idem et de aliorum planetarum spiritibus est intelligendum, ut in historiis patet qui omnes secundum proprietates naturae astrorum suorum influunt et operantur ad inferiora mundi huius ». See also, *Ibid.*, p. 42: « [...] circa in principio regiminis huius angeli Zacharielis Iouis, cuius est proprium spiritus, imperia mutare et regna, [...] ».

cryptographic nature of the work, which employed encrypted languages disguised in esoteric and demonological terms.⁷² Consequently, there has been a temptation to incorporate the *De septem secundeis*, in conjunction with *Steganographia* and *Polygraphia*, within Trithemius's cryptographic program, as it may potentially conceal coded messages or ciphers behind the temporal sequences or numerical cycles marking the alternation of angelic-planetary regimes. However, as Mentzel-Reuters has observed, the *De septem secundeis* does not provide tables of numbers or letters, nor any other clear indication that could serve as a key for deciphering an encrypted text. His distinctive approach lies in projecting world history onto the angelic order, formulating an unconventional chronology that does not align with a traditional salvation history centered on Christ's birth as the pivotal axis. Instead, Trithemius's primary focus is the systematic enumeration of years: when the theological-angelical framework of his pattern is removed, a purely serial division of history into equal-length segments is revealed, with the aim of 'rational' calculation of time.⁷³

⁷² A well-known example, also cited by Arnold and Culianu, is drawn from the first book of the *Steganographia*, in which Trithemius describes different methods for decoding encrypted messages. By using the name of the angel placed at the beginning of a message (*Parmesiel*), it becomes possible to identify the cipher needed to decrypt the encoded text. This process involves isolating only those letters within the text that carry meaning and disregarding all others as irrelevant. In the demonic conjuring provided, one must read only the even letters of the even words: « Parmesiel oShUrMi delmuson ThafLoIn peano ChArUsTrEa melani LiAmUmTo colchan PaRois madin MoErLaI bulre ATLEoR don mElCoUe peloin, IbUtSiL meon mIsBrEaTh alini DrIaCo person. TrIsOLNaI lemom aSoSIE midar iCoRiEl pean ThAlMo, asophiel ILNoTrEoN baniel oCrimOs esteuor NaElMa besrona ThUlaOMoR fronian bELDoDrAiN bon oTALmEsGo merofas ElNaThIn bosramoth ». Through this process, the invocation is revealed to conceal a simple Latin message that explains the procedure itself: « Sum tali cautela ut prime litere cuiuslibet dictionis secretam intencionem tuam reddant legenti » – « I use such caution that the first letters of each word convey your secret intention to the reader ». See TRITHEMIUS, *Steganographia*, p. 2.

⁷³ MENTZEL-REUTERS, « Serielle Chronographie », p. 389. Trithemius outlines 21 historical cycles beginning with the creation of the world – marked as year 1 and the start of Orifiel-Saturn's first regency – and extending to year 7441, which concludes the third regency of Michael-Sun. This final cycle approximately corresponds to 1879–2233 CE in our current calendar. Trithemius places the birth of Christ in the 245th year of Orifiel-Saturn's third regency, which corresponds to approximately year 5205 from creation. His treatise does not reach the final regency of Michael, but ends with a religious prophecy centered on the third cycle of Samael-Mars (6378–6732), specifically highlighting the year 1525 CE. The subsequent and final cycle, that of Gabriel-Moon (6732–7086), is left to prophetic insight, from which the future course of history must be discerned. On the religious-political meaning of the birth of Christ, Trithemius notes as follows: TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 34: « Nota quam pulchra divinae providentiae ordinatio! Mundus enim sub Orifielis regimine primo creatus est, et sub tertio quoque misericorditer redemptus, instauratus et renovatus, ut huic descriptioni regiminis mundi septem spirituum planetarum fidem non modicam tanta factorum consonantia ministrare videantur. In primo enim regimine Orifielis una totius mundi fuit monarchia, sub secundo [...] in multos divisa.

Nonetheless, Trithemius was careful to maintain a mystical explanation of history that upheld the esoteric understanding of his discourse, as evidenced by the use of prophetic language – without, however, straying into openly superstitious domains or practices such as the *ars notoria*. His commitment to a magical-initiatory interpretation of history is documented in the mystical-apocalyptic prophecy that concludes the treatise. As Noel Brann effectively summarised, considering Trithemius’s cosmic vision, « the supposition guiding the abbot in this endeavor is that prophecy [...] represents the extension of history into the future. Conversely, history is consummated prophecy ». ⁷⁴ The foretelling presented in the *De septem secundeis* pertained to the ominous events marking the end of the third cycle of Samael–Mars, further reinforcing the perception of Trithemius’s contribution as an intricate blend and esoteric speculation, astrological historiography, and cryptographic encoding:

Toward the end of this third revolution of Samael, ⁷⁵ the image of conflict will shift back to the beginning, and many will be lost. Unless *gamma* is brought back to *alpha*, by the ministry of God, there will be a transfer of some monarchy or of a great kingdom. A great religious sect will arise, and with it the destruction of the old religions. ⁷⁶ It is to be dreaded that the fourth beast will lose one head. Through the medium of Samael, Mars first of all governed over the flood, and the second time over the destruction of the Trojans. This time, near the end of the epoch, it will watch over the great loss of unity. For from preceding events future ones can be inferred which will follow them. This third revolution of Mars will not be completed without the fulfillment of a prophecy and the founding of a new religion. For in the year 1525, the crosses seen on men’s garments a decade earlier will reveal their effect. From now, in the year 1508, there remain seventeen years until the end of Samael’s governance, during which signs will appear, marking the beginning of evils. But in thirteen years’ time, you, summoned by right, will give place to one who does not know; yet after death, you will rise again greater for me in the third, unless the mist should hide you. ⁷⁷

Iterum sub tertio, ut cernitur, in unitatem revocata, licet, si recte metiamur, manifestum etiam fit in secundo regimine Orifielis unam totius mundi fuisse monarchiam, cum turris construeretur Babylon ».

⁷⁴ BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 134.

⁷⁵ As Mentzel–Reuters recalls, in ancient Jewish literature, Samael is identified with the Devil: see MENTZEL–REUTERS, « Serielle Chronographie », p. 391; GERSHOM SCHOLEM, « Samael », *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., 17 (2007), p. 714–715, in particular p. 714: « Samael, from the amoraic period onward the major name of Satan in Judaism ».

⁷⁶ On the concept of *secta religionis* as referring to heretical groups in the sixteenth century, see MENTZEL–REUTERS, « Serielle Chronographie », p. 392.

⁷⁷ BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 134–135. Adjustments and additions have been made to Brann’s partial translation of the passage. Presented here is the original Latin text as it appears in the *editio princeps*: TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, Impressum Nurnberge, Ioannes Haselbergs,

The text's symbolic and deliberately enigmatic formulation posed significant interpretative challenges while eliciting admiration among early readers of *De septem secundeis*. The prophecy for the year 1525 was soon read as a prediction of the Protestant Reformation, and in particular of the Peasants' War. Such retrospective and historically contingent alignment has prompted modern scholars to suspect possible textual manipulations, or even deliberate interpolations, in the printed version, especially in light of the loss of the original manuscript.⁷⁸ It remains plausible that such interpolations arose during the process by which Marquard commissioned a copy of the manuscript, potentially introducing revisions or corrections of his own. Conversely, if the transcription was executed faithfully, the interpolated material must already have been present in the exemplar consulted, having been introduced at an earlier stage of the text's transmission.⁷⁹

Notwithstanding these serious philological issues, and the reservations they elicit, we can still endeavour a kind of interpretation or decoding of the prophecy as a scholarly challenge. Trithemius foretells the imminent occurrence of grave calamities for humanity under the third cycle of Mars-Samael, predicated on the 'image of conflict' moving to the beginning, unless the Greek letter *gamma* (γ) is brought back to the Greek letter *alpha* (α) through divine intervention. Such an event would prevent political upheavals and inhibit the proliferation of a new

Nürnberg 1522, fol. B4r: « Circa finem huius 3 revolutionis Samaelis altercationis imago transibit ad primum, et erit perditio multorum. Nisi enim γαμμα [ed. Y] reducatur, deo ministrante, ad αλφα, erit alicuius monarchiae, vel magni alicuius translatio regni. Secta religionis consurget magna, veterum destructio religionum. Timendum ne caput unum amittat bestia quarta. In Samaele Mars primo praedixit diluvium, Troianum in secundo excidium, in tertio erit circa finem magnum unitatis detrimentum. Ex precedentibus iudicentur futura quae sequuntur. Non consumabitur Martis haec tertia revolutio sine prophetia, et novae alicuius institutione [ed. institutionis] religionis. Ab hinc anno Christianorum 1508 restant anni usque ad finem gubernamenti Samaelis 17, in quibus dabuntur significantes initium malorum figurae. Anno enim Christianorum 1525 cruces in vestimentis hominum, visae ante decennium quod praeteriit, suum ostendent effectum. Sed 13 ab hinc, iure citatus, locum dabis nescienti. Maior post fata resurges mihi in tertio, nisi licet nebula tegas ».

⁷⁸ See ISIDOR SILBERNAGL, *Johannes Trithemius. Eine monographie*, Krüll'sche Universitäts-Buchhandlung, Landshut 1868, p. 126–127; WILHELM SCHNEEGANS, *Abt Johannes Trithemius und Kloster Sponheim*, Reinhard Schmithals, Kreuznach 1882, p. 182–183; VON BEZOLD, *Astrologische Geschichtskonstruktion*, p. 70–72; BRANN, *The Abbot Trithemius*, p. XIII; MENTZEL-REUTERS, *Serielle Chronographie*, p. 392, note 102.

⁷⁹ MENTZEL-REUTERS, « Serielle Chronographie », p. 391. This problematic picture is further substantiated by the textual intricacies found even within this brief passage which arises complex philological issues, as discussed by Mentzel-Reuters in his clarifying essay. The *editio princeps* of the *De septem secundeis* presented the Latin letter Y, which likely stands for the Greek γ . This interpretation is supported by the peer 1522 German edition, which reads: « Es sey dann, daß das γαμμα auß götlicher ordnung zu dem αλφα, das ist das hynderst zum fordersten widerumbb geführt werde », as reported in MENTZEL-REUTERS, « Serielle Chronographie », p. 392–393.

religious sect that threatens to supplant traditional worship. The numerical value of the Greek letters, in accordance with ancient numerical conventions, may symbolize the numbers 3 and 1, potentially alluding to cryptographic procedures or serving as fundamental elements within religious and esoteric frameworks. The numbers 1 and 3 not only remind the Trinity and God's assistance against evil, but also function as metaphysical principles in Trithemius's vision of alchemy, facilitating intellectual ascent to truth and the performance of miracles by means of natural magic.

Given its mathematical character, Trithemius's alchemical inquiry was underpinned by numerological assumptions, such as the concept of the *tetractys*, drawing from ancient Pythagoreanism, a tradition that was reinvigorated also through Nicolas of Cusa up to Johann Reuchlin's teachings, particularly in his *De arte cabbalistica*. Trithemius theorised that remarkable natural phenomena, including wonders, portents, and miracles, emerge from the interplay of metaphysical concepts such as unity, duality, triad, tetrad and decade.⁸⁰ The practical implementation of numerical principles in alchemy is of particular significance, as these are employed in the manipulation of the four natural elements (water, air, fire, and earth) to evoke the occult virtues of things. As these virtues do not originate from the elements themselves, but rather from their structured interaction influenced by celestial bodies, the alchemist should have been cognizant of both the numerical principles employed in working with the elements and the Hermetic doctrine of the correspondence between higher and lower worlds. This essential concept, particularly successful in Renaissance Neoplatonic cosmology, was embraced by Trithemius following the second precept of the *Tabula Smaragdina*, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus.⁸¹

Both in the 1503 letter to Johannes von Westenburg and in the 1505 letter to Germain de Ganay, Trithemius focused on the relationship between the One/Monad (*unarius* or *monas*), the Two (*binarius*), the Three (*ternarius*), the Four (*quartenarius*) and the Ten (*denarius*), describing their properties as connected to

⁸⁰ TRITHEMIUS, *Polygraphiae libri sex, praefatio*, fol. A6v: « Adest viro sapienti mens sana in corpore bene morigerato, quae desiderio sublimioris intelligentiae sursum acta, cum per similitudinem binarii a ternario redierit in unitatem, deinceps iam facile ad denarium consurget. Pythagoras Samius ille philosophus, discipulos monuit non esse quaternarii obliviscendum, in quo prima numerandi perfectio comprehenditur. Sic etenim numeramus, unum, duo, tria, quatuor. Siste mentem, habes namque decem. Denarius enim perfectionis est caput ». On the rediscovery of Pythagorism in the Renaissance, see CHRISTIANE L. JOOST-GAUGIER, *Pythagoras and Renaissance Europe: Finding Heaven*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2009.

⁸¹ An insight on the use of the numerical principles in natural magic is presented in TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 93–97. For the Hermetic reference see BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 125–126; TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 67: « Quod est superius est sicut quod est inferius, et quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius, quia solis unitatibus constat omnis numerus ad perpetranda miracula unius rei multa ».

the ascent to the first principle and the transition from the last to the first, as well as the preeminence of the One over the other principles. In this context, he underlined the very same process of *reducere* (to bring back), which in the prophecy connected *gamma* and *alpha*, while in alchemy it related the Three to the One.⁸² Such a numerological framework, which recurs many times throughout Trithemius's epistolary exchanges concerning magic, was derived from the teachings of Pelagius of Maiorca through the mediation of Libanius Gallus.

In a 1505 letter to Trithemius, Libanius encouraged his pupil to conduct himself as both a Christian and a Pythagorean, emphasising inner unity and the unity of all things in the One – while eschewing the multitude and preserving in silence the *anacrisis*.⁸³ This referred to both the secret transmitted to him by his master, the hermit Pelagius, and the eponymous work by Pelagius himself, entitled *Peri anacriseon ton hypnoticon* (*On Revelations of Secret Things in Dreams*), which Libanius would have earlier delivered to Trithemius. This work, dated 1480 and divided into three books, was an esoteric letter addressed to Libanius which dealt with theurgy understood as *ars notoria*. As Peter Forshaw summarised, « It provides extensive advice on how to obtain knowledge in a brief space of time, about any licit art, such as alchemy, discover hidden treasures, or find solutions to problems, with a long list of divinatory arts ». Pelagius's aim was to teach « to raise the intellect and mind from sensible things and elevate them, by intervals to heavenly things ».⁸⁴

⁸² CARLOS GILLY, « Tra Paracelso, Pelagio e Ganello: l'ermetismo in John Dee / Between Paracelsus, Pelagius and Ganellus: hermetism in John Dee », in CARLOS GILLY, CIS VAN HEERTUM (eds.), *Magia, alchimia, scienza dal '400 al '700; L'influsso di Ermete Trismegisto / Magic, Alchemy and Science, 15th-18th Centuries*, Centro Di, Firenze 2002, vol. I, p. 288 (letter to Johannes von Westenburg): « To it, i.e. to the monad, one may proceed from the ternary and the quaternary, so that the denary be completed, from which, through number, there is a return to one[ness]; [there is thus] simultaneously an ascent and a descent to the monad through the tetraktys [...] All those who do not know this principle of the monad will not gain anything in the ternary, and will not attain the sacred quaternary»; Ibid., p. 288 (letter to Germain de Ganay): « The ternary must be reduced to the unity, so that the mind may achieve perfect understanding of these things. The unity is not really a number and yet it is the origin of all numbers. If one rejects the binary, then the ternary can be converted the unity. This recognition of the unity, Germain, is, as Hermes was wont to say, 'true without lies, certain and most true' ». See TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 66–67, 93.

⁸³ TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 78–80: « Silentio anacrisim serva, nec ante tempus emitte columbam. [...] Unus esto tecum, et cave ne solus. Multitudinem fugito omnem, quia unum est omnia, et sine uno est nihil. [...] Tu tantum in Christo manens fidelis, in uno solo, quod licite potes, Pythagoricus esto ».

⁸⁴ PETER FORSHAW, *The Mage's Images: Heinrich Khunrath in His Oratory and Laboratory*, vol. III: *Mage & Alchemist*, Brill, Leiden 2025, p. 251. According to both Ms. Lat. 7456 and Ms. Lat. 7486A of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the full title of the work is *Magistri Pelagii heremitae sanctissimi ad Libanium suum in philosophia naturali discipulum epistola in opus subjectum Peri anacriseon ton hypnoticon*. On Pelagius writings, see JULIEN VERONESE, « La notion d'«auteur-magicien» à la fin du

Furthermore, Pelagius described the ability to communicate with angels, to learn from them the *arcana* (hidden truths), and to receive their aid in times of danger.

Writing to Trithemius, Libanius referred to this mystical gift as *anacrisis* – a Greek term connoting ‘inquiry’ or ‘examination’ in legal context (ancient Greek: ἀνάκρισις) – following Pelagius’s use of the term within his own semantic field as referring to the idea of ‘intellectual vision’ (*visio intellectualis*) and of learning how to access a mystical-prophetic disclosure.⁸⁵ In his work, Pelagius had devised a path to spiritual ascent grounded in the interplay between four metaphysical principles: the Monad, the Binary, the Ternary, and the Quaternary, understood not merely as numerical categories, but rather symbolic articulations of the soul’s ontological condition and its potential return to divine unity. In this context, the process of *anacrisis* becomes a (Neoplatonic) contemplative and theurgical operation: a mystical form of inner questioning or invocation through which the *arcana* are disclosed to the soul. Pelagius emphasized that such revelation is accessible only to those whose intention is unwavering and whose desire is fervently directed toward spiritual knowledge. When the mind is seized by the intensity of this longing, it is momentarily « carried away from itself » and in this state of ecstasy the *arcana* unveil themselves.⁸⁶

As Carlos Gilly explained, the same Libanius provided in his *Brevis terminorum explicatio libri primi Pelagii, a Libanio tradita Trithemio*, an interesting decipherment of the numerical concepts employed by Pelagius in the *Peri anacriseon*, which would have effectively helped Trithemius in understanding this wondrous art. According to Libanius, the *Monas* signifies the divine mind – the immutable source and principle of all being and knowledge – while the *Binarius* represents either the

Moyen Âge: Le cas de l’ermite Pélégus de Majorque († v. 1480) », *Médiévales*, 51 (2006), p. 119–138; JEAN DUPEBE, « L’écriture chez l’ermite Pélégus. Un cas de théurgie chrétienne au XV^e siècle », in ROGER LAUFER (ed.), *Le texte et son inscription*, Editions du CNRS, Paris 1989, p. 113–153; ID., « L’ermite Pélégus et les Rose-Croix », in *Rosenkreuz als europäisches Phänomen in 17. Jahrhundert*, Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Pelikan, Amsterdam 2002, p. 134–157.

⁸⁵ PETER FORSHAW, *The Mage’s Images*, p. 252.

⁸⁶ GILLY, « Tra Paracelso, Pelagio e Ganello », p. 289, which presents a quotation and translation of a passage from the *Anacrisis* included in the Ms. Lat. 2902, Paris, Arsenal, fol. 272r–274r: « In order to obtain a distinct revelation of the anacrisis, it is necessary that the seeker's intention is firm and constant, and the desire in asking as ardent as possible. The stronger the fervour of the request, the easier it will be to obtain the result requested. This is why each time the mind, thrilled by the intensity of the desire, is carried away, the secrets of the mystery are revealed at once, as all experts of this art have testified: who know how to make the Pythagorean Binary [= the angelic intellect] descend, have drawn the Ternary [= mind, human soul] in the Monas [= divine mind]. Indeed, if man does not learn how to sublimate the Binary in the Monas, he will not succeed in extracting the desired purity from the turbid wine. In the Binary the unity is present only once and hardly is it subtracted through the sacred Quaternary [= working of the mind] from the straight line in the subsistent order, it liberates itself and returns to the most pure and finest Monas ». The conceptual clarifications, included by Gilly in square brackets, will be discussed shortly.

fragmented human mind or the intermediary angelic intellect, depending on its contextual relation to the *Ternarius*. The *Ternarius* itself functions as a mediating principle, denoting the human soul or mind in its active, elevated state, following its path to ascent toward reintegration and unity. Together, these conceptual metaphors delineate a hierarchical metaphysics of spiritual progression, deeply rooted in Neoplatonic psychology. The *Quaternarius*, elsewhere in the same commentary, expands this schema to encompass both the operation of the mind and the human body. Pelagius's mystical system envisions the soul's journey as a movement from multiplicity and division, through mediated harmony, back into the realm of the Monad.

This symbolic order culminated in a series of striking metaphors that describe the soul's progressive interior transformation. As Libanius maintained, « the mind turns the stars into the sun ». It means that the multiplicity of thoughts, images, or intellectual intuitions – figured as stars – is transfigured into the unified light of the sun, emblematic of divine truth and pure intellection. Crucially, this metamorphosis occurs through a spiritual habituation (*consuetudo*) by which the soul becomes accustomed to divine realities, eventually transcending the limits of rational thinking. Similarly, the image of the « line beneath the Monad » signifies the soul's vertical aspiration toward the divine, motivated not by intellectual inquiry but by a longing born of love (*desiderium amoris*). Finally, the triangle emerges as a symbolic synthesis of these dynamics: it represents the soul not merely as intellect, but as intellect animated by desire and inquiry, seeking God through a dialectic of contemplation and yearning. In this geometrical metaphor, thinking, loving, and questioning are not separate faculties but converging movements of a single soul oriented toward the divine. The interplay of number, form, and spiritual psychology in this schema reflects a vision of ascent that is at once intellectual, affective, and metaphysical: a contemplative path of gnosis, wherein the soul regains its original unity through divine illumination and existential purification.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ GILLY, « Tra Paracelso, Pelagio e Ganello », p. 293, note 19: « Unitas et Monas frequenter ponuntur pro Mente divina et principio totius [...]. Binarius aliquando ponitur pro intellectu angelico, aliquando etiam pro Mente humana, maxime quando Ternarius non sequitur [...]. Ternarius pro Mente sive anima humana semper accipitur, nisi quando de S. Trinitate sermo proprie habetur [...]. Quaternarius, in hoc libro, pro operatione mentis ponitur. Alias in Philosophia saepius pro humano corpore, ut Deus, Angelus, Anima, Corpus [...]. Binarii Lucentis, id est, Angeli proprii aperta visio ... Ternarius sine interpositione Binarii est Mens sine Angelo in Deum erecta [...]. Stellas Mens convertit in Solem, quando longa consuetudo superat rationem [...]. Linea sub Monade ipsa est Mens per Desiderium amoris elevata in Deum [...] Triangulus est Mentem cum desiderio Quaestionis in Deum elevare; Monadem sine haesitatione immobili consistentia interrogare; et accepto responso in seipsum descendere ». Libanius's *Brevis terminorum explicatio* is copied in the same manuscript.

Following in the footsteps of his esoteric forerunners, Trithemius identified the path to magical gnosis as one of inner ‘reduction’ according to three steps: a return of multiplicity to oneness, the rejection of the dyadic principle, and the transmutation of the ternary into the monad. This process, grounded in spiritual discipline and enacted through the *magus*’s volition and faith in God, reestablishes the being’s lost unity and initiates a process of supernatural reintegration.⁸⁸ A recontextualization of this doctrine helps re-reading the first section of Trithemius’s religious prophecy. Informed by alchemical-numerological lens, Trithemius’s language is revealed to function as a dual device, serving as a warning to the emperor and an exhortation to take appropriate measures. The threat of subversion, foretold by the rise of the religious sect, may be averted, provided that the path of *anacrisis* is pursued judiciously. In accordance with the theoretical tenets espoused by Pelagius, this process entails the recollection of the Ternary (*gamma*) into the Monad (*alpha*).

As Trithemius would have later outlined in the *quaestio prima* (*De fide et intellectu*) of his 1515 *Liber octo quaestionum*, which follows Thomistic concepts, there is a tripartition of the intellect according to degree from the higher (perfect) to the lower (imperfect) being: divine, angelic, and human. Therefore, it is imperative for the human mind to undergo a reorientation towards the mind of God. In order to reconstitute unity from division, this reorientation is facilitated by the mediating function of the angelic mind, in the same manner as with the human intellect, which acquires knowledge through the intermediation of the angelic intellect.⁸⁹ This signifies the restoration of the soul’s alignment with the divine order against the cataclysm prophesied, not merely as a theoretical proposition, but rather as a practical injunction based on the principles of *magia naturalis*. In this context, Trithemius’s *De septem secundeis* can be understood as an appeal towards political-theological intervention under God’s assistance, in which a vision is encoded that sees mystical gnosis as the safeguard of both cosmic and imperial stability.

Although Trithemius did not explicitly refer to great conjunctions, his prophecy concerning the year 1525 may have been influenced by contemporary

⁸⁸ Trithemius’s distinction between true and false alchemy, as outlined in his letter to de Ganay, was grounded on these conceptual foundations. Whilst the former sought spiritual purification through comprehension of numerical principles governing nature, the latter, predicated on secular endeavours to manufacture gold, was motivated solely by human avidity and lack of faith. See TRITHEMIUS, *De septem secundeis*, p. 68–69; BRANN, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, p. 70–71, 126–128.

⁸⁹ TRITHEMIUS, *Liber octo quaestionum*, ch. I, fol. Aiiiv: « Unde manifestum est quod angelicus [intellectus] immobiliter proprium apprehendit obiectum. Ad quod humanus per medium angelicum post multas sui exercitationes [...] tandem aliquando discurrens sibi parat ascensum ». On the tripartition of the intellect, see *ibid.*, fol. Ar–v; THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae*, I^a, q. 87, art. 3.

astrological literature on the terrifying flood predicted for 1524. This hypothesis was supported by Paola Zambelli, who drew attention to the shattering fear as a result of the grand conjunction of all planets in Pisces around February 20th, as anticipated by Johannes Stöffler and Jacob Pflaum in their *Almanach nova* (1499). In their calculations included in this widespread *prognosticum*, Stöffler and Pflaum identified sixteen planetary conjunctions occurring in the water sign of Pisces in February 1524, which they interpreted as heralding a period of extraordinary and transformative upheaval.⁹⁰ This widely circulated forecast inspired more detailed and ominous interpretations from coeval astrologers, such as Luca Gaurico in his multiple *prognostica*, who anticipated cataclysmic events such as a great flood, earthquakes, widespread disease, and the emergence of a false prophet.

Since the prediction sparked intense debate among prominent astrologers (such as Johann Virdung, Georg Tannstetter, Agostino Nifo, Paul of Middleburg) and incited public anxiety about the approaching of a second universal flood, Trithemius's prophecy could have been prompted by the frightening expectations it generated.⁹¹ The temporal proximity to the predicted deluge, the forecasted rise of a new religious sect, the implied warning of dynastic collapse, and the emphasis on political-religious disorder, all resonate with the tone of contemporary predictions. Furthermore, Trithemius's symbolic language suggests an implicit engagement with the same cosmological worries. His allusions to cataclysm, spiritual disintegration, and the need for divine restoration, while veiled, may reflect a theurgical reinterpretation of the astrological fears surrounding the year 1524, reframed within his own esoteric framework as a break in religious unity, according to his planetary cycle system.

Besides, Trithemius's forecast drew upon biblical apocalyptic narrative, as he alluded to the beasts described in the *Book of Daniel*, particularly in the chapters delineating four visions concerning the history of humanity as the sequence of four empires which prepare the advent of the kingdom of God (Dn 7:1–28). In this prophecy, Daniel is said to have encountered four monstrous beasts that symbolise

⁹⁰ LYNN THORNDIKE, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. V, New York, Columbia University Press, 1941, p. 181: « In this year we shall see eclipse neither of sun nor moon. But in this year will occur positions of the planets well worthy of wonderment. For in the month of February will occur twenty conjunctions, small, mean and great, of which sixteen will occupy a watery sign, signifying to well nigh the whole world, climates, kingdoms, provinces, estates, dignitaries, brutes, beasts of the sea, and to all dwellers on earth indubitable mutation, variation and alteration such as we have scarce perceived for many centuries from historiographers and our elders. Lift up your heads, therefore, ye Christian men ». See IOANNES STOEFFLERINUS IUSTIGENSIS, IACOBUS PFLAUMEN VLMENSIS, *Almanach nova plurimis annis venturis inservientia...*, Ioannes Reger, Ulm 1499, [fol. 389r]. The hypothesis is presented in ZAMBELLI, *White magic*, p. 78–80.

⁹¹ On the unfolding of the whole debate, see THORNDIKE, *A History of Magic*, p. 178–233; PAOLA ZAMBELLI, «Many Ends for the World: Luca Gaurico Instigator of the Debate in Italy and in Germany», in EAD. (ed.), *'Astrologi hallucinati'*, p. 239–264; ROBIN B. BARNES, *Astrology and Reformation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, p. 82–130.

ancient historical empires: a winged lion representing Babylon, a bear with ribs in its mouth signifying the Median Empire, a four-headed winged leopard denoting the Persian Empire, and a final beast described obscurely as possessing iron teeth and ten horns, which is reputed to indicate the Macedonian empire. An eleventh small horn, which rises among the others and uproots at least three of them, bearing human-like eyes and a mouth that speaks arrogant words, is interpreted as referring to Antiochus IV Epiphanes and, accordingly, the Seleucid dynasty that emerged from the dissolution of Alexander the Great's empire.⁹²

Prominent Christian exegetes of the *Book of Daniel*, including Irenaeus of Lyon, St. Jerome, and St. Augustine, engaged in discourse about the correct interpretation of Daniel's metaphors and the foretelling of the Antichrist. For instance, as Eusebius of Caesarea before him, St. Jerome conducted a fierce polemic with Porphyry's *Against the Christians*, which sought to deny both the authorship of the prophet's book and the very same nature of its prophecies, contextualising them as referring to past historical events.⁹³ In his *Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, he focused on the identification of the fourth beast with the Roman Empire, while challenging Porphyry's reading of the third and fourth beasts as both referring to the Macedonian history, thereby collapsing the fourth and third empires into a single Macedonian sequence which would have denied any reference to future happenings. In Porphyry's exegesis, the leopard represented Alexander, with the final unidentified beast being interpreted as a symbol of his four successors. In this way, Daniel's mention of the ten horns implied a review of ten kings up to Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the eleventh ruler, while the uprooted horns signified Ptolemy VI Philometor, Ptolemy VII Evergetes, and Artaxia I of Armenia.⁹⁴

On the contrary, St. Jerome claimed that the ten horns denoted the collapse of the Roman Empire and its subsequent division into ten kingdoms. By adopting this exegetical framework, he considered the absence of an animal comparison for the fourth beast as serving to emphasise the unparalleled brutality of Rome and

⁹² For an overview, see JOHN J. COLLINS, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Matrix of Christianity*, Crossroad, New York 1987 (1984¹), p. 68–92; JOHN J. COLLINS, PETER W. FLINT (eds.), *The Book of Daniel. Composition and Reception*, 2 vols., Brill, Boston – Leiden 2002.

⁹³ SOPHRONIUS EUSEBIUS HIERONYMUS, *Commentaria in Danielelem*, in JACQUES PAUL MIGNE (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, vol. XXV, Paris 1845, col. 491–492; PORPHYRY, *Against the Christians*, ed. ROBERT M. BERCHMANN, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2005, p. 157; JAY BRAVERMAN, *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel. A Study of Comparative Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Hebrew Bible*, The Catholic Biblical Association of America, Washington (DC) 1978, p. 91–94. On Porphyry's interpretation of Daniel's prophecies, see PHILIP MAURICE CASEY, « Porphyry and the Origin of the Book of Daniel », *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 27/1 (1978), p. 15–33; SAMUEL MULLINS, « The Rules of Engagement: Porphyry's Attack on Christian Allegory », *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition*, 19/1 (2023), p. 47–64.

⁹⁴ EUSEBIUS HIERONYMUS, *Commentaria in Danielelem*, col. 530.

regarded this beast as a combination of all the ferocious characteristics of the previous ones. As Porphyry's sought to contain the Daniel's visions within the context of Hellenistic dynasties, St. Jerome reasserted the eschatological orientation of the prophecy, identifying the little horn with the Antichrist, who will arise in the last days from the fragmentation of the Roman Empire. As St. Jerome maintained, Daniel's vision anticipated the final judgment in accordance with the broader Christian apocalyptic tradition.⁹⁵

However vivid Trithemius's apocalyptic imagery may be, it remains fundamentally unclear which of Daniel's beasts he intended to invoke. In his prophecy, he warns of the danger that the 'fourth beast' might lose one of its heads. This formulation, however, appears at odds with Daniel's vision, as Mentzel-Reuters has observed. In the biblical account, it is the third beast – the leopard – that possesses four heads, whereas the fourth beast is not likened to any known animal and is described instead as having a single head crowned with ten horns, three of which are uprooted by a smaller, eleventh horn. Trithemius thus seems to conflate features of the third and fourth beasts, giving rise to a marked interpretative ambiguity. Whether this conflation reflects a deliberate mystical strategy, an exegetical misunderstanding, or a mere scribal error remains an open question.

If Trithemius's prophecy was shaped by Jerome's commentary or by Porphyry's critical observations, its cryptic imagery may plausibly be read as an allusion to the Holy Roman Empire. Trithemius appears to have engaged with the *Book of Daniel* in a selective and unsystematic manner, fashioning an allegorical construct designed to address pressing contemporary political concerns. By embedding theological and political anxieties within a deliberately opaque biblical idiom, he may have sought to deliver a veiled admonition to Emperor Maximilian, who had been crowned in Trent on 4 February 1508 and later played a key role in the formation of the League of Cambrai against Venice during the second phase of the Italian Wars. In doing so, the abbot positioned the Holy Roman Empire at the centre of an imminent eschatological crisis. This interpretation is further reinforced by the concluding apostrophe, addressed directly to the emperor, which anticipates his eventual resurgence or triumph in the face of the impending upheaval.

At the heart of the prophecy lies a symbolic characterization of Maximilian I, portrayed by Trithemius as a Christ-like figure, as suggested by the idea of resurrecting greater after death in the third cycle of Samael–Mars. The lexical choices are carefully calibrated to resonate with the imagery of the mythical phoenix, a creature that is cyclically reborn from its own ashes. This well-established symbol of Christ here seems less to anticipate a strictly soteriological

⁹⁵ EUSEBIUS HIERONYMUS, *Commentaria in Danielelem*, col. 530–531.

resurrection than to prefigure the political and spiritual renewal of the German Empire under Maximilian's guidance. Similarly, the motif of concealment 'behind a cloud' may be read as an allusion to the biblical topos of divine hiddenness. In the Gospels, Christ's post-resurrection appearances culminate in his ascension into heaven (Matthew 24:30; Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51), accompanied by his concealment within a cloud (Acts 1:9–11). Such imagery of veiling or obscuration may signify not a definitive withdrawal, but rather a temporary absence preceding a triumphant return, thereby reinforcing the messianic typology ascribed to the German emperor. Moreover, the present participle *nescienti* is not entirely incidental to this Christological framing. It may subtly evoke the theological controversy surrounding the Arian doctrine of the *Christus nesciens*, namely Christ's professed ignorance of the precise moment of the Last Judgement, as articulated in Mark 13:32. Within Trithemius's symbolic economy, this element of divinely sanctioned unknowing may serve to underscore the tension between concealment and revelation, ignorance and foreknowledge, that underpins both eschatological expectation and imperial destiny.⁹⁶

Furthermore, Trithemius draws attention to the appearance of 'the crosses on men's clothing' (« cruces in vestimentis hominum »), which were seen almost a decade before 1508 and were believed to manifest their full significance by 1525. This detail invited a layered interpretation. On one level, as Zambelli suggests, the imagery evokes the Crusades. On another level, the rise of the religious sect could be linked to the threat posed by the Turks. As Mentzel-Reuters notes, a later German translation of the *De septem secundeis*, entitled *Wunderbüchlein, wie die Welt von anfang regiert ist* and published in Speyer in 1529, adopted this latter reading. Therefore, Trithemius foretelling could be interpreted as a call for a renewed campaign against the Ottoman Empire.

Although his interpretation of the crosses is embedded within an esoteric and highly opaque symbolic framework, Trithemius nonetheless correlates the phenomenon with specific historical events, which he documents with remarkable care. In the *Annales Hirsauigienses*, he records the reappearance of such miraculous signs at pivotal moments in history, including a notable instance in 958, during the reign of Emperor Otto I. The phenomenon resurfaced once again in 1500, this time on an unprecedented scale across wide regions of Europe. According to Trithemius's account, crosses began to appear spontaneously on garments and household textiles – shirts, women's clothing, tablecloths, and other fabrics – not only on items in daily use, but even on those kept in locked chests and seemingly untouched. The manifestation extended to liturgical textiles as well, including altar cloths, corporals, and priestly albs. The first occurrences were

⁹⁶ See KEVIN MADIGAN, « *Christus Nesciens?* Was Christ Ignorant of the Day of Judgment? Arian and Orthodox Interpretation of Mark 13:32 in the Ancient Latin West », *The Harvard Theological Review*, 96/3 (2003), p. 255–278.

reported along the Rhine and soon spread throughout much of Germany, encompassing Swabia, Franconia, Bavaria, Austria, Bohemia, and Saxony, before reaching Denmark, Poland, Holland, Brabant, and even parts of France. These signs provoked widespread fear and astonishment among the population. The crosses themselves were described as small and irregular in form, resembling stains produced by a greasy or oily substance. They could not be removed by washing and typically faded only after nine days, a temporal detail that further reinforced their perceived supernatural character.⁹⁷

In addition to the crosses, Trithemius also records the manifestation of other signs of Christ's Passion – nails, the lance, the crown of thorns, scourges, and Greek-like characters. These appeared in churches during divine services, on canons' rochets, on altar cloths, and on the garments of certain women – always on linen. Notably, the abbot links these portents with a significant mortality rate that followed their appearance, suggesting that they served as divine omens warning of the plague that spread soon after. Indeed, in 1502 and again in 1503, the plague afflicted many of the same regions where the crosses had first appeared, seemingly confirming their connection to impending catastrophe.⁹⁸

Yet the significance of these crosses should not be reduced to that of mere portents of disease or physical calamity. They also bear a deeper mystical and theological resonance, functioning as symbols of an impending religious upheaval.

⁹⁷ TRITHEMIUS, *Annales Hirsaugienses*, vol. II, p. 580 (year 1500): « Anno praenotato cruces apparuerunt in lineis vestimentis hominum, in camisiis, in lintheaminibus, in mensalibus, in peplis mulierum, in albis sacerdotum, et corporalibus, non solum in his, quae in quotidiano habebantur usu, sed etiam in illis, quae abscondita jacebant in cistis, ad quae nullus poterat aeris penetrare influxus. Caeperunt autem inprimis apparere circa Rhenum, ac deinde per totam Germaniam, in Suevia, in Francia Orientali, in Bavaria, in Austria, in Bohemia, in Saxonia, in Dacia, in Polonia, in Hollandia, in Brabantia, per Galliamque totam, non sine timore et horrore magno mortalium. Subito et insperato apparuerunt, ut cadere quodammodo putarentur de coelo. [...] Erant autem cruces parvulae, confusi et subrubri coloris, ac si pannus aliqua pinguedine mixti coloris fuisset intinctus. Non poterant aliqua lotione deleri, sed post nonum diem ut plurimum per se evanescebant. In quibus etiam cum crucibus magnis apparuerunt multae cruces parvulae, characteres in mundum Graecarum litterarum, clavi quoque, lancea, spinea corona, virgae, flagella, et reliqua Dominicae Passionis insignia, eratque videre terribile miraculum. Astantibus enim in ecclesia canonicis apparuerunt in rocchetis eorum, simul et in pallis altarium, et praesertim in peplis mulierum, non omnium, sed quarundam, et solum in lineo. Magna mortalitas has cruces secuta est ».

⁹⁸ TRITHEMIUS, *Annales Hirsaugienses*, vol. II, p. 588 (year 1502): « Eodem anno, magna ubique per omnem Germaniam pestilentia grassabatur, et multa milia hominum consumpsit. Praesignata ut multorum fuit opinio per cruces, quas in lineis vestibus hominum ante biennium apparuisse diximus, quarum casus in annum duravit tertium, non simul et semel il locis omnibus, sed jam in isto, tunc vero in alio. Videbantur etiam nonnulli cruces habuisse in suis corporibus ad cutem, qui ut plurimum omnes eodem anno, vel sequente fuerunt consumpti a peste »; *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 595 (year 1503): « Adhuc saeviens pestilentia consumpsit mortales, et pecorum ingens mortalitas fuit, praestiteruntque iam nunc, quae apparuerunt cruces ante biennium, significationis suae formidabile triplicis futurae calamitatis principium ».

Trithemius records additional signs of a heightened apocalyptic consciousness around 1501, among them the emergence of a mysterious eastern ruler variously named *Sichin* or *Sophoi*, who can almost certainly be identified as Shah Ismā'īl I of Persia, the founder of the Safavid dynasty. Trithemius depicts Shah Ismā'īl as a charismatic and militarily formidable leader who assembled a vast following drawn largely from social outcasts and the dispossessed, enabling him to seize control of Persia and to challenge Ottoman supremacy. This sudden ascent is framed not merely as a geopolitical development, but as a portent of a far-reaching spiritual crisis. According to Trithemius, the new Shah aspired to universal dominion and sought to impose a single, unified religion upon the world, thereby abolishing religious plurality altogether. In this light, he was perceived by contemporaries as an ambivalent and deeply troubling figure, simultaneously revered by some as a new prophet and feared by others as the Antichrist.

The abbot's commentary on these events is markedly polemical, particularly in his denunciation of the Jews, whom he accuses of erroneously identifying this figure as their long-awaited Messiah. For Trithemius, such beliefs exemplified the dangers of false messianic expectation in an age of eschatological ferment. Accordingly, the year 1501 is construed not simply as a chronological marker, but as a symbolic threshold: the onset of an eschatological transformation characterised by upheaval, deceptive hope, and the imminence of divine judgement.⁹⁹

This extended analysis allows us to draw several conclusions regarding a plausible interpretation of Trithemius's cryptic message to Maximilian I. The notion that Trithemius possessed genuine prophetic insight into future developments – such as the Protestant Reformation – may be safely set aside. Nor is it necessary to presume textual manipulation, since the prophecy associated with the year 1525 merely condenses a range of historical episodes, symbolic motifs, and esoteric traditions into a small number of densely charged formulations, all refracted through the astrological framework of the *De septem secundeis*. Rather than functioning as a literal prediction, Trithemius's prophecy is more convincingly understood as a symbolic admonition: a veiled warning

⁹⁹ TRITHEMIUS, *Annales Hirsaugienses*, vol. II, p. 583–584: « Triennio ferme de illo duravit rumor in tota Europa magnus, aliis dicentibus illum prophetam Dei esse novum atque potentem, qui totum mundum sibi subjecturus sit, et omnes religionum diversitates revocaturus in unitatem. Erant qui hominem ipsum dicerent esse finalem illum Antichristum, alii nescio quid aliud eum in orbe magnum somniabant esse futurum. Sed plus omnibus laetabantur caeci et infelices Judaei per totam Europam ubilibet constituti, hunc suum rati Messiam, quem semper expectant nunquam futurum, [...]. Mittunt sibi nuntios Judaei atque munuscula, spem erigunt, confortant animo desperatos, multa promittunt, maxima pollicentur, hunc esse testantur, quem sibi salvatorem diu sunt praestolati, quo videlicet regnante magnum Palestinae sint brevi dominium recepturi. Sed erraverunt decepti ut saepius, quoniam Sophi nullam gentem, ut dicitur, magis habet invisam, quam Judaeorum ».

addressed directly to the emperor. By encoding a vision of impending religious and political rupture within the language of biblical typology and apocalyptic allegory, Trithemius urges Maximilian to assume a quasi-messianic role in the preservation of order and the defense of Christendom. Within this interpretive framework, the appearance of crosses serves as both visual evidence and symbolic confirmation of this summons, anchoring the urgency of the message in concrete phenomena observed between 1500 and 1502 and interpreted as manifestations of divine intent. Trithemius's prophecy, therefore, is best read not as a forecast of specific future events, but as a politically charged exhortation cloaked in apocalyptic imagery: a plea for decisive imperial intervention at a moment perceived as one of acute historical and spiritual crisis.

VIII. *Emperor's Enchiridion*

A strictly political interpretation of the prophecy provides a compelling lens through which to apprehend the ultimate purpose of Trithemius's *De septem secundeis*. As Francisco de Paula Souza de Mendonça has insightfully observed, the fact that Trithemius – through his cryptographic writings – sought to furnish his high-ranking correspondents with instruments capable of enhancing and consolidating political authority over time lends considerable weight to this reading. Both the *Steganographia* and the *Polygraphia*, with their intricate systems for the encoding and transmission of secret messages, illustrate how cryptography could be harnessed by rulers for strategic ends: to protect sensitive information in diplomatic exchanges, to detect conspiracies or internal dissent, and, ultimately, to secure the continuity of sovereign power.¹⁰⁰ By way of example, in his controversial letter of 1499 to Arnold Bost, Trithemius asserts that the mysteries of the art of steganography – disclosed to him through supernatural means – are principally of value within the political sphere, and that, for the good of the state, such knowledge ought to be reserved exclusively for princes. He explicitly cautions against its wider dissemination, contending that, if placed in the wrong hands, it could give rise to deception, betrayal, and moral corruption.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ FRANCISCO DE PAULA SOUZA DE MENDONÇA, « Anjos planetários e o mundo sublunar: Trithemius, astrologia e política nos séculos XV e XVI », *Revista História: Debates e Tendências*, 19/1 (2019), p. 135–146.

¹⁰¹ See the concluding remarks of the letter, which was included in GASPARD SCHOTT, *Schola steganographica in classes octo distribuita*, Sumptibus Iohannis Andreae Endteri, Würzburg 1680, p. 215: « Si quaeris, unde mihi ista, quae nemo alius novit? Audi. Non ab homine, neque per hominem ista didici, sed per revelationem nescio cuius. [...] Neminem ista adhuc docui, quamvis multi promittentes magna saepe rogarint, praeter unum principem cui scribo. Nec decet ista alios scire, quam principes, alioquin multa ea fierent mala, traditiones, deceptiones, fornicationes, et alia quaecunque vellent homines mali. Sed bene utentes arte, multa per eam bona reipublicae facere possent ».

In this light, the *De septem secundeis* likewise emerges as a distinctly political instrument. By constructing a historical model grounded in the cyclical governance of planetary intelligences, Trithemius offers Maximilian a conceptual framework through which to interpret, anticipate, and regulate collective human behaviour – whether that of subjects, allies, or adversaries. The supremacy of the German emperor, legitimated within the present cycle ruled by Mars, is thus underwritten by knowledge of Samael, the planetary intelligence presiding over the age, together with the religious and socio-political transformations that his influence is destined to unfold. Armed with this esoteric insight, Maximilian would be positioned to act deliberately and strategically: to discern recurring patterns, neutralise emerging threats, and ultimately shape the course of events, thereby attaining a degree of mastery over historical contingency. By embedding cryptographic prophecy within a planetary historiography, Trithemius offers a form of strategic foresight – a coded manual of imperial governance concealed beneath prophetic language. His synthesis of mystical, political, and cosmological elements thus elevates astrology into a quasi-rational science, capable of disclosing both divine intention and the scope of human agency. The *De septem secundeis*, in this interpretation, does not simply forecast future events; it equips its imperial reader with the interpretative instruments required to navigate – and potentially to direct – them.¹⁰²

Trithemius's *De septem secundeis* offers a sophisticated synthesis of astrology, theology, and cryptography, constructing a deterministic yet pliable model of history that reconciles astral causality with human agency. By mapping the rise and decline of empires onto celestial cycles governed by planetary intelligences, the abbot advances a teleological vision that merges prophetic insight with political utility, thereby addressing the perennial tension between fate and free will. His historiographical method frames history as both a divine narrative and a coded system, wherein human actors – most notably rulers – may exert influence through knowledge, discernment, and timely action. In this context, the emperor is no longer merely a passive subject of fate, but an informed participant in the divine economy, capable of negotiating historical contingency through esoteric understanding.

The philosophical implications of this model resonate beyond immediate politics, engaging Renaissance debates on providence, contingency, and the compatibility of divine omniscience with human freedom. Trithemius constructs a vision of history as a decipherable text – a tapestry woven by divine will but legible to those equipped with the right interpretive tools. His fusion of prophetic language, astrological theory, and cryptographic methods reflects the intellectual ambitions of Renaissance polymathy and situates his work at the crossroads of

¹⁰² DE PAULA SOUZA DE MENDONÇA, « Anjos planetários », p. 141.

magic, religion, and statecraft. In the final analysis, the *De septem secundeis* presents history not merely as a record of past events, but as a structured system through which the human intellect may understand the nature of time, anticipate its unfolding, and act prudently within it. Trithemius thus provides a framework for navigating the complexities of temporal power, religious transformation, and eschatological expectation – an ambitious attempt to align cosmic order with political foresight at a moment of profound historical uncertainty.

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