

An Astrological Board-Game from the “Book of Games” of Alfonso X of Castile

Introduction

In his *Murūj al-Dhahab wa-ma‘ādin al-jawāhir* [“The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems”], the 10th-century Islamic historian-geographer Abu al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī al-Mas‘ūdī described a board-game of Indian origin which was known as the “Celestial Spheres” (*al-falakīya*). This appears to be the earliest reference to an astrological board-game referred to as “Star-Chess” in Byzantine sources and as the “Star Game” (*kawākib*) in the *Nafā’is al-funūn fi ‘arṣ al-‘uyūn* compiled around 1340 by the Persian physician and lexicographer Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd Āmulī. In Iberia the game was known as “Los Escaques” and a detailed description of its rules is found in the *Libro del Acedrex*, commissioned by Alfonso X “el Sabio” of Castile and completed in 1283.



Libro del Acedrex, fol. 96^v.

Playing the Game of the Celestial Luminaries

This game is played on a seven-sided board with seven concentric circles representing the orbital spheres of the planets (Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter & Saturn). Each circle is divided in twelve sectors, representing the signs of the zodiac, and smaller intervals. The game is played by seven players, each representing one of the planets. Each player starts with twelve stakes of whatever is agreed upon and moves his piece in counter-clockwise direction in the number of spaces dictated by the roll of a seven-sided die. Whenever a player reaches a new sign of the zodiac the astrological aspects with the other players are inspected to determine his gains or losses.

When a favourable aspect is made, such as *sextile* (two signs away) or *trine* (four signs away), the player wins either two or three stakes from the aspected player. However, when an unfavourable aspect is made, such as *quadrature* (three signs away) or *opposition* (six signs away), the player loses either three or six stakes to the aspected player. In the case of a *conjunction* (two planets occupying the same sign), which can be favourable or unfavourable, the player loses twelve stakes to the aspected player.

According to Āmulī the game ends when the Sun and Jupiter are both in the same sign and also in opposition with both Venus and Mars. The Alfonsine version does not specify a terminal planetary configuration and the game probably ended when only one player was left.

Bibliography

- Charles Barbier de Meynard & Pavet de Courteille, *Maḥūdī: Les prairies d’or* (Paris: l’Imprimerie Impériale, 1861/1877), vol. I, p. 160; vol. VIII, pp. 313–314.
- Harold James Ruthven Murray, *A History of Chess* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), pp. 349–351.
- Harold James Ruthven Murray, *A History of Board-Games Other than Chess* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. 156–157.
- Reinhard Wieber, *Das Schachspiel in der arabischen Literatur von den Anfängen bis zur zweiten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Bonn: Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1972), pp. 248–249.
- Ulrich Schädler, “Sphären-“Schach” zum sogenannten “Astrologischen Schach” bei al-Mas‘ūdī, al-Āmulī und Alfons X”, *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaften*, 17 (1999/2000), 205–242.
- Sorra Musser Golladay, *Los libros de acedrex dados e tablas: Historical, Artistic and Metaphysical Dimensions of Alfonso X’s Book of Games* (Tucson]: Department of Spanish and Portuguese of the University of Arizona, 2007), pp. 627–656, 1032–1043 & 1374–1392.
- Ulrich Schädler & Ricardo Calvo, *Alfons X. “der Weise”: Das Buch der Spiele* (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2009 [= *Ludographie: Spiel und Spiele*, Band II]), pp. 307–322.

Rob van Gent

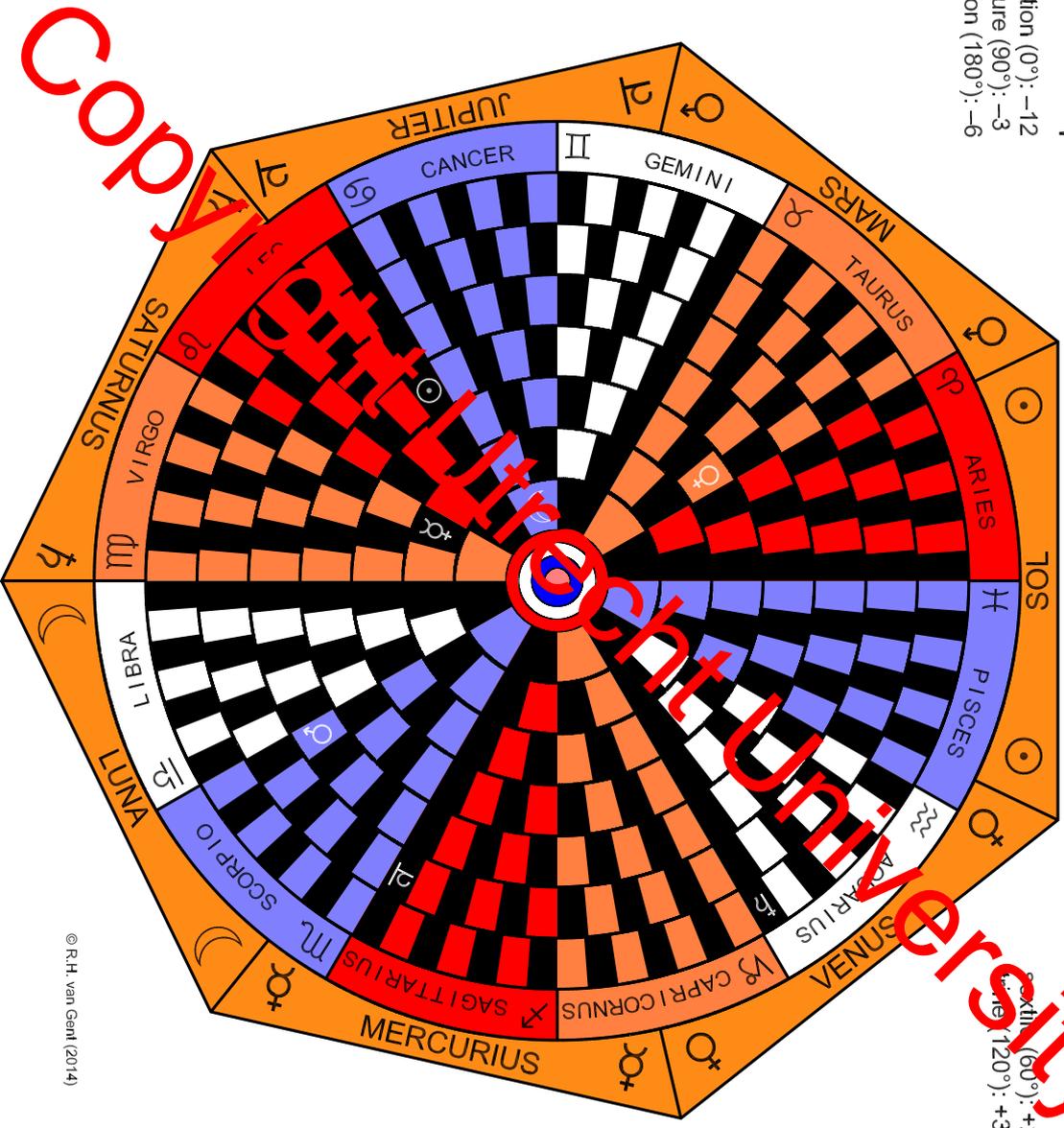
Department of Mathematics
Utrecht University
The Netherlands

*

Copyright Utrecht University

Unfortunate aspects

- conjunction (0°): -12
- quadrature (90°): -3
- opposition (180°): -6



Fortunate aspects

- trine (120°): +3
- sextile (60°): +2