

THE SORTES REGIS AMALRICI : An Arabic Divinatory Work in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem?

Until recently it has been supposed that very little Arabic learning came to the West via the Crusader States, in contrast to the massive amount that arrived through Spain, and Southern Italy and Sicily. Thanks to the work of Benjamin Kedar, Rudolf Hiestand, Bernard Hamilton and others, the situation of cultural exchange in the Middle East no longer seems as bleak as was earlier thought.¹ However, one work of supposedly oriental origin needs reassessing. This is the *Sortes regis Amalrici*, allegedly composed by the “doctor of the most kind King Amaury” (*benignissimi regis Amalrici medicus*) whom Charles Homer Haskins introduced as one of the very few “translators in Syria during the Crusades” in the chapter with this title in his authoritative *Studies in the History of Mediaeval Science*.² King Amaury I, Frankish king of Jerusalem (1163-74), provided Arabic materials to William of Tyre for writing his history of events in the East,³ and we know of one Arabic doctor who served him.⁴ It is attractive to think

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¹B. Z. Kedar, *The Franks in the Levant: 11th to 14th Centuries*, (Aldershot, 1993) [Kedar is preparing a book-length study on the intellectual history of the Frankish Kingdom of Jerusalem]; R. Hiestand, “Un centre intellectuel en Syrie du Nord? Notes sur la personnalité d’Aimery d’Antioche, Albert de Tarse et Rorgo Fretellus,” *Le moyen âge*, 5th series, 1, 1994, 7–36; B. Hamilton, *The Latin Church in the Crusader States*, (London, 1980); *Crusaders and Muslims in Twelfth-Century Syria*, ed. M. Shatzmiller, (Leiden, 1993).

²See Chapter 7 in C. H. Haskins, *Studies in the History of Mediaeval Science*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge, MA), 1927, 130–40.

³William, Archbishop of Tyre, *Cronicon*, 19.21, ed. R. B. C. Huygens, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*, 63 and 63A, Turnhout, 1986, II, 892:

hec siquis plenius scire voluerit, illam legat Historiam, quam de Orientalibus principibus et eorum actibus a tem-poribus predicti seductoris Mehemeth...cum multa scripsimus diligentia, instante et rogante domino Amalri-co, inclite memorie, et exemplaria Arabica ministrante.

⁴This is Abū Sulaymān Dāwūd, who was sent by the Egyptians to King Amaury in the late 1160s and treated Amaury’s leprous son; see E. Kohlberg and B. Z. Kedar, “A Melkite Physician in Frankish Jerusalem and Ayyubid Damascus: Muwaffaq al-Dīn Ya‘qūb b. Siqlāb”, *Asian and African Studies*, 22, 1988, 113-26, reprinted in Kedar, *The Franks in the Levant*, article XII. Kohlberg and Kedar suggest that Abū Sulaymān may be the same as the *regis Amalrici medicus* (p. 114); this article questions that identification. The fact that later in the twelfth century Muwaffaq al-Dīn Ya‘qūb b. Siqlāb is described as adopting

that the *Sortes* may also come from an Arabic source, as their use of Arabic lunar astrology suggests. This note explores the identity and origin of these *Sortes*, in particular in respect to whether they really do have a local Arabic origin.⁵

The *Sortes regis Amalrici* is a divinatory work. The client asks one of twenty-eight questions, concerning every aspect of daily life: his life-expectancy, his house, receiving knowledge, going on a journey, receiving honours, changing his clothes and so on. The practitioner then follows a set of instructions to arrive at one of twenty-eight possible answers to these questions, which include predictions such as: "Your life will be prosperous, but there will be hardship at the end"; "Age, wind and rain are ravaging your house"; "An enormous knowledge of what is good will be given to you free"; "Hasten your step until everything comes to you"; "Much unhappiness is your lot, and no honour or glory is given to you"; "Your clothing will last for a long time".⁶ The form of the *Sortes regis Amalrici* closest to the original appears to be that in MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Savile 21 (thirteenth century), in which a set of rules (= *Regula IIIA*) is followed by divinatory tables and twenty-eight sets of verse predictions in rhythmic hexameters, each headed by a "lunar mansion" with an Arabic name (= *Versio I*). Apparently derived from this is a shortened form of *Regula IIIA*: *Regula IIIB*, which is accompanied by the same tables and verses, but with the rhythmic hexameters reworked into Classical hexameters (= *Versio II*; MS British Library, Harley 3814, part I, fourteenth century). A truncated version of *Regula IIIA* reappears in MSS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 46 and its copy, British Library, Sloane 3554. A further thirty or so manuscripts include one or other version of the verses, with other forms of rules that no longer mention the doctor of King Amaury.⁷

The circumstances of the composition of the text are described in *Regula IIIA* as follows:

the dress of the Frankish physicians (p. 118) suggests that Frankish physicians were in the majority in the Crusader kingdom of Jerusalem.

⁵The present article forms an addendum to the author's "What is the *Experimentarius* of Bernardus Silvestris? A Preliminary Survey of the Material", *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, 44, 1977, 79–125, reprinted in Burnett, *Magic and Divination in the Middle Ages*, (Aldershot, 1996), article XVII, where full details about the manuscripts of the *Sortes*, and editions of the *regulae* and specimens of their verses, can be found.

⁶These are translations of the Latin verses edited in Burnett, "What is the *Experimentarius*?", 108–9.

⁷The preface attached to the *Sortes* in five of these manuscripts, which refers to the work as "*Experimentarius Bernardini Silvestris*" and describes Bernardinus as its "faithful translator from Arabic into Latin" ("*fidelis ab arabico in latinum interpres*"), does not appear to belong to the *Sortes*; see Burnett, "What is the *Experimentarius*?", *passim*.

- 1 A certain doctor of the most unconquered and kind King Amaury established this work of twenty-eight questions concerning fates according to the twenty-eight mansions in which the Sun delays in the whole year, considering the nature and power of the seven planets.
- 2 (He did) this for the praise of the king and as a memorial to his deeds — especially his triumph over the recently conquered Shirkuh,
- 3 who, as leader of the Persians, Turks, Turcomans, Kurds, Saracens and Arabs and many different races, with all his forces had forcibly invaded the whole of Egypt except some fortification which they call “Cassarum”.
- 4 The ruler of the Egyptians and those confined with him sent to the king and, demanding help, obtained it from him.
- 5 For King Amaury, crossing through the desert with a few men, chased a terrified Shirkuh into a very well-defended city, and forced the great number of his army to enter that city, and, by fighting him for a long time there, helped by divine power, he overcame him strongly by force of arms and drove him out of the whole of Egypt — something that seemed a marvel to all.
- 6 The Egyptians were made tribute-payers to King Amaury for ever.
- 7 After this deed the aforementioned doctor of the King arranged the aforementioned work according to the arrangement of the planets (as appears below in order) for the fifth king of the Franks reigning in Jerusalem prosperously with the protection of God.⁸

Shirkūh (here spelt “Syracōn”/“Siracon”), the Kurd, was the lieutenant of Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. Zangī, the Zangid sultan of Aleppo.

⁸⁻¹Quidam invictissimi ac benignissimi regis Amalrici medicus hoc opus .xx. et .viii. questionum super fata secundum .xx. et .viii. mansiones in quibus Sol in toto anno moratur, naturam et potestatem .vii. planetarum considerans instituit.

⁸⁻²Hoc autem ad regis laudem et gestorum eius memoriam et maxime triumphum nuper domiti Syraconis,

⁸⁻³qui dux Persarum, Turcorum, Turcomanorum, Cordiorum, Agarenorum et Arabum et multarum diversarum gentium, cum omnibus viribus suis totam Egyptum violenter invaserat preter quamdam municionem quam Cassarum vocant,

⁸⁻⁴dominus Egypciorum et cum eo inclusi ad regem miserunt et auxilium postulantes ab eo impetraverunt.

⁸⁻⁵Rex autem Amalricus cum paucis per deserta transiens in civitatem quamdam munitissimam Siraconem perterritum fugavit sui que multitudinem exercitus intrare coegit ibique eum diucius expugnando, quod omnibus mirum fuit, divina adiutus potentia cum Marte potenter domuit ac de tota Egypto expulit.

⁸⁻⁶Et facti sunt Egypcii Amalrico regi tributarii in eternum.

⁸⁻⁷Post quod gestum prefatus regis medicus predictum opus secundum planetarum ordinem ut infra in serie apparet ordinavit et regi domino Francorum quinto in Ierusalem feliciter deo protegente regnanti

Haskins, *Studies*, 136; Burnett, “What is the *Experimentarius?*,” 117.

He eventually expelled the Franks from Egypt and installed himself there; his nephew Saladin officially succeeded the Fatimid rulers of Egypt and led the offensive against the Franks that resulted in the capture of Jerusalem in 1187. The reference here is to one of the earlier, successful, campaigns of King Amaury I against Shirkuh. There were two of these, one in 1164, the other in 1167. Haskins suggested that the reference here is “more probably, because of the mention of permanent tribute, to the Egyptian campaign against Shirko in 1167”.⁹ However, in the 1167 campaign, King Amaury was not invited by the Sultan of Egypt, who was at first perturbed by the presence of the Christians on Egyptian soil, and only afterwards was relieved and thankful that they were there because of the mobilisation of Shirkuh’s forces. The tribute, too, is described by William of Tyre not as being “inaugurated” in the 1167 campaign, but rather as being “increased”, and the old pacts were to be renewed.¹⁰ The situation described in the *Sortes* fits much more closely that of the 1164 campaign, which William of Tyre describes as follows (the equivalent sentence-numbers of the *Sortes* are added in bold type-face).¹¹

- 3 Shirkuh (“Siracenus”), invading a city on the borders [of Egypt] called Bilbeis, began to claim it [either Bilbeis or Egypt] firmly as if it belonged to him, signifying by deed, and perhaps arguing the same by word, that he wished to put the remaining parts of the same kingdom under his jurisdiction, [even] if this was given (?) without the consent of the Sultan and the Caliph.
- 4 Shawar [the Egyptian sultan]...with all haste sent legates and words of peace to the lord king [Amaury] in Syria, that they should immediately implement the agreements that the lord king had earlier embarked upon with Dargan [the previous sultan] not only by word, but also by deed, and also, if need be, add further conditions.
- 5 Having agreed to the conditions on both sides, the king with the whole army of his men, in the second year of his reign, took up the journey and went down again into Egypt. There Shawar met him with his Egyptians, and they besieged the aforementioned Shirkuh, as if withdrawing himself into his own fortress, in the city of Bilbeis, and they compelled him to surrender, worn out by a long siege and a lack of food.

⁹Haskins, 136.

¹⁰William of Tyre, *Cronicon*, 19.17, ed. R. B. C. Huygens, II, 886: maior ei tributorum summa statueretur... Placuit ergo sibi, et idipsum nostris visum est expedire, vetera innovare pacta pacisque perpetue federa inviolabili stabilitate inter dominum regem et calipham firmare, annua quoque tributi ampliata pensione domino regi certa stipendia de erario caliphe constituerentur.

¹¹*Chronicon*, 19.7 (ed. cit., II, 872–3).

The similarities to be noted are the invasion of Egypt by Shirkūh, the invitation to King Amaury from the Egyptian sultan, the consequent long siege of Shirkūh by Amaury in a certain city, and the eventual decisive victory of the Christian king. The differences can be attributed to exaggeration of the story as it travelled through time and space. Shirkūh has not merely captured Bilbeis, which is the first major town one comes to when entering Egypt from the North East, but has conquered the whole of Egypt except the citadel (*qaṣr*) of Cairo, in which the Sultan and his men have been isolated.¹² The magnitude of Amaury's victory is enhanced by the statement that his forces were small and those of Shirkūh were large. Finally, the name of the besieged city (as well as of the doctor who arranged the *Sortes*) has been forgotten.

This lack of precision (and possible running-together of two campaigns by Amaury against Shirkūh) would suggest that the *Sortes regis Almarici*, as we have it, are at some distance from the original text compiled for the king — or, at least, that the author of the rules for the use of the *Sortes* (*Regula IIIA*) was writing on the basis of hearsay and probably not in the Crusader States. There remains the question of whether the *Sortes* themselves are the authentic article, written by the doctor of the king. One clue may be provided by the sources of the *Sortes*, which have not, up to now, been identified. The actual technique by which these *Sortes* operate is found quite widely in early medieval Latin manuscripts. It uses mechanical methods (often involving drawing a random number of dots or using a numbered wheel) to find an answer to a fixed number of specific questions.¹³ What differentiates this *Sortes* text from that of others is that, instead of classifying the answers by birds, patriarchs, constellations of the zodiac or the like, it classifies them by the twenty-eight lunar mansions, with their Arabic names. This is the only specifically oriental aspect of the work.

The lunar mansions are the twenty-eight divisions of the ecliptic circle (the course of the Sun through the heavens) marked out by the Moon in its monthly course. It takes just less than twenty-eight days to arrive back at the same point in respect to the stars (measured from the first degree of Aries to its return to the same degree of Aries = its side-

¹²For the word *qaṣr* ("Cassarum") —whose common meaning is "castle" or "palace"— being applied specifically to the citadel in Cairo see *Chronicon*, 19.18 (ed. cit., II. 887): "[The envoys of the king] *Cahere ingressi et ad palatium, quod lingua eorum cascere, accedentes...*"

¹³For the history of the genre of *sortes*-literature, and a full bibliography, see T. C. Skeat, in "An Early Mediaeval 'Book of Fate': the *Sortes XII Patriarcharum*", *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies*, 3, 1954, 41-54, and further discussion in Burnett, "What is the *Experimentarius*?", 84-5.

real or tropical orbit).¹⁴ These twenty-eight divisions represent an alternate way of dividing the ecliptic to that of the twelve signs of the zodiac. But this alternative was not used in Classical Antiquity. Hence, when it appears in the Middle Ages, there were no Greek or Latin names readily available to designate the lunar mansions. On the other hand, the twenty-eight division was popular amongst the Arabs already in pre-Islamic times, and the Arabic names for the lunar mansions were retained when the doctrine was transmitted to the Latin West.

In the *Sortes regis Amalrici*, however, there is a fundamental flaw. The order of the mansions is wrong. The first mansion appears in the place of the second one, and this displacement affects the whole work, with the result that the last mansion is missing. This displacement is evident throughout the text: in the headings of the verse responses, in the tables, and, above all, in *Regula IIIA*, where the position of each of the mansions in respect to the signs of the zodiac is given, and the stars which make up their constellations are depicted. In fact, the sections of the zodiac and the constellations are in the right place, but the name of the first mansion is given to the second section of the zodiac and the second constellation, the name of the second mansion is given to the third section of the zodiac and the third constellation, and so forth. A quotation from the opening of the description in *Regula IIIA* should make this displacement clear:

Iudices autem fatorum viginti et octo sunt, in viginti et octo Solis mansionibus in quibus annalem cursum explet. Quarum mansionum nomina hec sunt:

Almazene caput Arietis, et sunt tres stelle sic stantes [three stars are drawn horizontally]

Anatha [= the first mansion] venter Arietis et sunt tres stelle sic stantes [three stars are drawn vertically]¹⁵

The clue to the reason for this displacement is near at hand. For the first Latin texts to include descriptions of the lunar mansions belong to the "Alchandorean corpus", of which the earliest manuscript dates from the end of the tenth century.¹⁶ This is a corpus of astrological works, which consists of material from several sources (including Hebrew and

¹⁴By the time it reaches this point the Sun has moved further forward along the circle, and the Moon takes another couple of days to reach the Sun (its synodic orbit, measured from New Moon to New Moon, which gives the more familiar "days of the Moon").

¹⁵Burnett, "What is the *Experimentarius?*", 118.

¹⁶A. Van de Vyver, "Les plus anciennes traductions latines médiévales (xe-xi^e s.) de traités d'astronomie et d'astrologie," *Osiris* 1 (1936), 658-89 (see 667-79).

Latin as well as Arabic), and much repetition. However, one set of lunar mansions is introduced with the words:

Haec sunt nomina .xxviii. mansionum Lunae per quas aetiam omnes planete cursum suum peragunt, suntque divisa per .xii. signa que Sarraceni nuncupant ita. Almen. Zele, Anatha, Albotan, Arthuria.¹⁷

These are the twenty-eight mansions of the Moon through which all the planets also run their courses, and they are divided between the twelve signs. The Saracens name them in this way: Almen Zele, Anatha, Albotan, Arthuria.

The first of the Arabic words — “*Almen. Zele*” — is not a name of a mansion, but a transliteration of the Arabic term for “mansion” — *al-manzil*.¹⁸ It was obviously meant to be the heading to the list of lunar mansions that follows. It is clear that the compiler of the *Sortes regis Almarici* read a similar text, and had misinterpreted the word for “lunar mansion” (here corrupted into “*Almazene*”) as the name of the first mansion.

There are other elements which the compiler of the *Sortes* shares with the Alchandrian corpus. These include the forms of the constellations, which are depicted in a rota in the earliest manuscript of the *Liber Alchandreï philosophi*,¹⁹ and the Arabic names of the mansions,²⁰ and their distribution amongst the signs of the zodiac.²¹ One peculiarity of the account of the mansions in the *Sortes* is that they are described as being the stopping-places of the Sun rather than of the Moon, but this, too, is not incompatible with the information in the Alchandrian corpus, which, in most cases, refers to them as “divisions

¹⁷Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, lat. 17868 (tenth century), f. 14v (within the “literary reworking” of the *Liber Alchandreï philosophi*, beginning “*Quicumque astronomie...*”).

¹⁸The extra “e” at the end is a phenomenon found in other Arabic terms transliterated into Latin; e.g. “*cifre*” = “zero” from Arabic *ṣifr*.

¹⁹Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, lat. 17868, f. 18v.

²⁰The *Sortes* and the Alchandrian corpus both favour the alternative names for the sixth mansion (*al-taḥāyī*) and the nineteenth mansion (*al-ibra*), rather than “*al-han‘a*” and “*al-shawla*”, which are found in most other Latin versions of the Arabic lunar mansions. In the matter of transliteration the correspondences are less clear, since there is already considerable variation within the Alchandrian corpus, with different characteristics apparent in the transliterations in the *Liber Alchandreï philosophi*, in the text beginning “*Quicumque nosse...*” and in the *Proportiones competentes in industria stellarum* (the last exhibiting contamination by Hebrew script). Conclusions on the route of transmission of the names of the lunar mansions must await the edition of the relevant sections of the corpus being prepared by Silke Ackermann and the author.

²¹This is within the *Liber Alchandreï philosophi*; see Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, lat. 17868, f. 5r. The only conspicuous difference in this respect is the occasional use in the *Sortes* of the Greek word “*soma*” (“body”), instead of “*ventr*” for the middle part of the sign of the zodiac.

of the sky" rather than "mansions of the Moon".²² The first occasion on which they are introduced in the Alchandrean corpus is particularly reminiscent of the language of the *Sortes*, especially in respect to the use of the term "*fata*":

Haec sunt .xxviii. principales partes vel astra, per que omnia fata disponuntur, et indubitanter tam futura quam presentia pronuntiantur, a quocumque itus, reditus, ortus, occasusque horum horoscopiorum iocundissimo auxilio diligenter providentur. Nec frustra huiusmodi ratio colligitur, cum tempora omnia temporibus sic ordinante sapientissimo Deo distinguantur. Omnia enim tempora tempus habent, et per .xxviii. temporum mutationes vel mansiones sibi invicem succedunt.²³

These are the twenty-eight principal parts or constellations through which all fates are disposed, and both future and present things are foretold in a way free from doubt by anyone who carefully observes the comings, returnings, risings and settings of each one of these ascensions (?), as a most pleasurable help. Nor is the reason for this considered to be in vain, since all times are differentiated from each other according to the arrangement of the most wise God. "All times have their time"²⁴ and through the changes or "staying-the-same"²⁵ of these twenty-eight, (times) succeed each other.

There is, therefore, no reason to suppose that the compiler of the *Sortes regis Amalrici* had direct access to an Arabic source for the lunar mansions. An elementary knowledge of Arabic would have prevented him from making such a glaring mistake as to confuse the Arabic word for "mansion" with the name of the first mansion. On the other hand, there are several manuscripts of the Alchandrean corpus dating from before the mid-twelfth century, and our author could easily have had access to this material, especially in a French centre.²⁶ It is, of course, possible, that the author of *Regula IIIA* was different from the "doctor of King Amaury" and introduced the classification of the responses according to the lunar mansions and the corresponding description of those mansions in the rules for use. But once this element is discounted, nothing Arabic or "oriental" remains in the *Sortes*. They turn out to be lists

²²The following are the terms used to describe the mansions in the *Liber Alchandreii philosophi*: "*principales partes*", "*astra*", "*temporum mutaciones vel mansiones*", "*mansiones Lunae per quas aetiam omnes planete cursum suum peragunt*", "*de celi spera continente .xii. signa necnon .xxviii. receptacula*", "*.xxviii....hospicia*".

²³Paris, BN, lat. 17868, f. 5r with variants from London, British Library, Add. 17808, f. 90r and Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, clm 560. The London and Munich manuscripts give as the last phrase: "et per .xxviii. temporum permutationes sibi invicem succedunt".

²⁴Cf. Ecclesiastes, 3.1: "*omnia tempus habent*".

²⁵A pun on "*mansio*" is implied.

²⁶For manuscripts of the corpus see Van de Vyver, 666.

of answers to specific questions, belonging to a genre that was well established in the West; these lists have been arranged under the exotic names of Arabic lunar mansions which had also been known in Latin since at least the late tenth century. The “doctor of King Amaury” could be a fiction, added to lend a touch of exoticism to the divinatory text. But even if a doctor of King Amaury was really responsible for the verse responses and their arrangement, he was not drawing on the local divinatory techniques. Rather he provides another example of the prevalence of Frankish culture in the Frankish colony of the kingdom of Jerusalem.²⁷

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²⁷See Kedar, *The Franks in the Levant: 11th to 14th Centuries*, passim.