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Pelerin de Prusse , Edgar Laird , Robert Fischer
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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Pelerin de Prusse on the Astrolabe: Text and Translation of His Practique de astralable by Pelerin de Prusse, Edgar Laird and Robert Fischer

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Greco-Arabic sciences and the Aristotelian physical worldview from the middle of the twelfth century onward.

Her interpretations have much to recommend them. One must, however, remember their limits of applicability. First, these are historical sources, not philosophical and scientific ones. Second, sources from France and Germany are not included. Third, manuscript materials do not come into the picture. Fourth, letters are not used. Finally, if we are to evaluate early medieval scientific—or even just astronomical—acumen, do we look only at observational accuracy? Draelants's interpretive conclusions are interesting and stimulating but limited to the evidence assembled. The assemblage and arrangement of evidence constitute the primary virtue of this book.

BRUCE EASTWOOD

Pèlerin de Prusse. *Pèlerin de Prusse on the Astrolabe: Text and Translation of His Practique de astralabe.* Edited by **Edgar Laird** and **Robert Fischer.** (Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 127.) 115 pp., figs., apps., bibl., index. Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1994. \$20.

The short treatise on the astrolabe written in French by the fourteenth-century scholar Pèlerin de Prusse should interest several classes of reader. It has astronomical and astrological content; it is an early example of a vernacular scientific work that is not at the most elementary level, and yet French was plainly not the writer's native tongue; it was completed in 1362 at the request of the dauphin, the future Charles V; and it has its chief source in common with Chaucer's treatise on the astrolabe, written a generation later in another vernacular. The common source is the second half of the Latin version of the (pseudo) Māshā'ẓallāh on the astrolabe, which has long passages close to both. The present edition of the *Practique* by Edgar Laird and Robert Fischer is accompanied by a translation into the modern equivalent of Chaucer's vernacular and is duly annotated. The only manuscript copy of which the editors are aware is that in St. John's College, Oxford, MS 164.

The historical background to the instrument is rather lightly sketched, and the very brief discussion of its invention and transmission might have been better omitted, for it does not define its terms in sufficient detail. (To say that the astrolabe was known to Ptolemy could mean at least three different things, for instance.) Pèle-

rin's indebtedness to the "Messehalla" text is brought out in the annotations, supported by the juxtaposition of a transcript from an Oxford manuscript (Selden Supra 78) with variants taken from R. T. Gunther's printed version (largely taken unacknowledged from W. W. Skeat). The editors make the useful point that "the similarity of Pèlerin's and Chaucer's additions and omissions seems to weaken the case for either author's dependence on a particular manuscript" (p. 15). They allude to Michael Masi's contention that Chaucer used MS Selden Supra 78. This same manuscript is here found a use, even so: an appendix in the present edition giving a listing of the lines on the plate and rete of an astrolabe is illustrated by figures drawn from it. (The reference to a twilight line is misleading, since there is none on the figure.) Philological notes are valuable, although it is hard to draw conclusions as to the author's style from the orthography, since its French copyist will presumably have overridden any obvious barbarities. The French text is only sixteen pages long, but it is well presented, translated, and explained—and that, after all, is the main purpose of the edition.

Pèlerin de Prusse was one of many astronomers at the French court, some of them dedicated, others hesitant, astrologers. The *Practique* has all the reader would have needed to determine the twelve house divisions for a horoscope by the then-standard method. Messehalla has two chapters on casting the houses for a horoscope, but while Chaucer takes over both, Pèlerin translates only one. He leaves us in no doubt that he values the astrolabe for its astrological potential—and there is a short booklet on elections from his hand, to confirm his orthodoxy. This *Livret de eleccions* is usefully printed as an appendix, although the notes appended to it are less reliable than those to the astrolabe text. In fact they end with a meaningless comparison of a set of house divisions from the *Livret* with a set from the *Kalendarium* of Nicholas of Lynn. (The former were of course for the latitude of Paris and the latter for the latitude of Oxford.) The horoscope explained in the *Livret* is indeed interesting, chiefly because it is so badly done—but truly on an astrolabe, and not calculated but pretending to be done by astrolabe. Even the sun's position is 10 degrees in error (but not 40 degrees, as is suggested in the notes). In this little work we can plainly see Pèlerin de Prusse in his true colors, and they are surely those of a court astronomer rather than a leading university scholar.

J. D. NORTH