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A Finding on the Iconography of the Decans in the Representation of the Month of December in the *Sala dei Mesi* in Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara

Abstract: *The Sala dei Mesi in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara belongs to those Renaissance monuments whose iconography has escaped a complete art-historical reading. The main issue discussed in this paper is a part of the decoration on the west wall of the Sala dei Mesi which represents the month of December. Our goal is to establish the state of scholarship and point to a finding concerning the representations of the decans that once appeared in the middle register of the wall, flanking the astrological sign of December, Capricorn. These correspond to a description of the first and the third decans of Capricorn in an ancient Indian astrological manuscript, the Yavanajātaka or Greek Horoscopy of Sphujidhvaja, dating from before A.D. 300. Our research and arguments are based in part on drawings made by Giuseppe Mazzolani in 1903, presuming that these are accurate and reliable enough to be used as a foundation for investigation into the iconography of December in the Sala dei Mesi.*

Keywords: Palazzo Schifanoia, Sala dei Mesi, Renaissance, Manilius, astrology, decans, Capricorn

The *Sala dei Mesi* in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara belongs to those Renaissance monuments whose iconography has escaped a complete art-historical reading.¹ One reason for this is that its decoration is only partially preserved. Another is the absence of any evidence for the written program for its decoration. While the latter situation is normal for Italian art of the 15th and the 16th centuries, it has compounded the difficulty scholars face when trying to identify many details in the decoration. It prevents us from establishing firm connections between the sections of the decoration and understanding the intended meaning of these frescoes.

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The topic of this paper is the iconography of the month of December in the *Sala dei Mesi* in the Palazzo Schifanoia. However, we shall not offer a reconstruction of its meaning within the context of the *Sala* as a whole. Our goal is to establish the present state of scholarship on *December* and contribute to it with a finding of a possible source for the representations of two decans that appear in the middle register of the wall. These have never been investigated as a source of further clarification for the overall iconography of the *Sala dei Mesi*.

The Palazzo Schifanoia. Its Building and Decoration

The Palazzo Schifanoia was originally built in 1389 as a hunting lodge for Marchese Alberto V d'Este. Borso d'Este² enlarged it by adding a second floor that contained luxurious apartments, and commissioned its decoration, between 1466 and 1469/1470.³ The Palazzo now served as one of the Este residences, as a pleasure

² The Este were one of the oldest and most established ruling dynasties of Italy. They had controlled Ferrara, the main seat of their government, since the 12th century, and Modena and Reggio since the 13th century. Their authority derived from three sources: imperial decree, papal appointment and popular election. Borso came to the Ferrarese throne in 1450, as Marchese; in 1452, Emperor Frederick III raised Borso to the rank of Duke of Reggio and Modena; he requested the title of Duke of Ferrara as early as 1459, but received it only in 1471 from Pope Paul II. On Borso, E. G. Gardner, *Dukes and Poets in Ferrara. A Study in the Poetry, Religion and Politics of the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries*, New York, 1968, 67-121; W. L. Gundersheimer, "Borso d'Este and the Transformation of Ferrarese Culture", *Ferrara, The Style of a Renaissance Despotism*, Princeton, NJ, 1973, 127-172; C. Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara during the Reign of Borso d'Este (1450-1471): A Study in Court Patronage*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Michigan, 1974, 3ff.

³ The former date is taken from an anonymous diarist (*Diario ferrarese dall'anno 1409 sino al 1502 di autori incerti*, Giuseppe Pardi (Ed.), Bologna 1928-33, 58). He briefly stated that 1469 was the year in which the works on Schifanoia ended: "1469, fu fornito de rehedificare il palazzo di Schivanoio appresso a sancto Andrea, et incominciato fu ad essere habitato per il prefacto duca Borso." The second date is found in Ugo Caleffini's chronicle and Francesco del Cossa's letter to Borso of 25th March 1470. Francesco del Cossa's letter is reprinted in P. d'Ancona, *The Schifanoia Months at Ferrara*, 92-93; C. Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara during the Reign of Borso d'Este*, 216-217 fn. 42.

Among the artists that worked on its reconstruction and decoration were Pietro di Benvenuto, Cosmè Tura, Francesco del Cossa, Ercole dei Roberti, Antonio Cicognara, Galasso and Baldassare d'Este. On the building of the palace see C. M. Rosenberg, "Notes on the Borsian Addition to the Palazzo Schifanoia", *Musei Ferraresi – Bollettino Annuale*, no. 3, 1973, 32-34; C. Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara during the Reign of Borso d'Este*, 167-77. Rosenberg states that the works on the palace must have been done by 1469 since Borso spent two weeks there, from October 17 to November 1, 1469, and that it was not likely that he would do so if it were filled with scaffolding and "accompanying discomforts and disturbances." C. Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara during the Reign of Borso d'Este*, 174. Also, P. d'Ancona, *The Schifanoia Months at Ferrara, with a Critical Notice on the Recent Restoration by Cesare Gnudi*, Milan, 1954, 9-12; E. G. Gardner, *Dukes and Poets in Ferrara*, 92-94; C. Rosenberg, *The Este Monuments and Urban Development in Renaissance Ferrara*, Cambridge, 1997, 23-24, 192 fn. 62.

resort and a place for festivities.⁴ It was richly decorated and furnished; the names of the rooms, such as The Room of the Maidens, of the Crests, of the Pine-cones, and of the Elephants, for example, alluded to their decoration. Such is the case with the *Sala dei Mesi – The Room of the Months*.

The *Sala dei Mesi* is decorated with wall paintings divided into twelve vertical panels dedicated to the months of the year; those on the west and the south walls (the representations of January, February, October, November and December) are almost completely lost today. There are other compartments with representations of architectural views, also severely damaged, between the windows on the north and the south walls. The decoration of the fireplace on the south wall also survives in a ruined state. Each of the twelve panels dedicated to the months was further divided into three horizontal registers. These were dedicated to different “realms”: the top one to the realm of the gods, the middle to the realms of the zodiac, and the lowest to that of men, the real world of everyday activities of Borso d’Este, himself and embodiment of good ruler.⁵

The author of the program of the *Sala dei Mesi* is not known. Aby Warburg proposed that the designer of the program was Pellegrino Prisciani, professor of

⁴ C. Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara during the Reign of Borso d’Este*, 199. There was no kitchen in the palace, whose very name “Schifanoia” means “keeping annoyance away.” Food was brought there from the court palace.

⁵ G. Bargellesi, *Palazzo Schifanoia: Gli affreschi nel Salone dei Mesi in Ferrara*, Bergamo, 1945; P. d’Ancona, *The Schifanoia Months at Ferrara*; C. M. Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara during the Reign of Borso d’Este*, 188-210; Manilius, *Astronomica*, with an English translation by G. P. Goold, Cambridge, Mass, 1977; C. Rosenberg, “Courtly Decorations and the Decorum of Interior Space”, *La corte e lo spazio: Ferrara Estense*, Roma, c. 1982; S. Macioce, “Palazzo Schifanoia; una proposta iconologica per il ‘Settembre’ nella Sala dei Mesi”, *Storia dell’arte*, diretta da G. C. Argan, no. 48, maggio/agosto, Florence 1983; S. Macioce, “La Borsiate di Tito Vespasiano Strozzi e la “Sala dei Mesi” di Palazzo Schifanoia”, *Annuario dell’Istituto di Storia dell’Arte*, Università di Roma “La Sapienza”, n. s., no. 2, 1984, 3-13; K. Lippincott, *The Frescoes of the Salone dei Mesi in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara. Style, Iconography and Cultural Context*, diss., University of Chicago, 1987; K. Lippincott, “The Iconography of the *Salone dei Mesi* and the Study of Latin Grammar in Fifteenth-century Ferrara”, in M. Pade, L. Waage Petersen, D. Quarta (Eds.), *La corte di Ferrara e il suo mecenatismo: 1441-1598, Atti di convegno internazionale, Copenhagen, May 1987*, Modena, c. 1990, 93-109; H. Ragn Jansen, “The Universe of the Este Court in the Sala dei Mesi”, in M. Pade, L. Waage Petersen, D. Quarta (Eds.), *La corte di Ferrara e il suo mecenatismo: 1441-1598, Atti di convegno internazionale, Copenhagen, maggio 1987*, Modena, c. 1990, 111-127; R. Varese (Ed.), *Atlante di Schifanoia*, Modena, 1989; M. Bertozzi, “Il talismano di Warburg. Considerazioni sull’impianto astrologico di Palazzo Schifanoia”, in M. Bertozzi, Ed., *Alla corte degli Estensi: Filosofia, arte e cultura a Ferrara nei secoli XV e XVI, Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Ferrara, 1992*, 199-208; C. Fratucello and C. Knorr (Eds.), *Il Cosmo incantato di Schifanoia. Aby Warburg e la storia delle immagini astrologiche, Palazzo Schifanoia*, Ferrara, 1998; R. Picello, *Schifanoia: cantiere aperto*, Ferrara, c. 1999; A. Warburg, “Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia”, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, Introduction by K. W. Forster, Translation by D. Britt, Los Angeles, 1999, 563-591 and G. Bing and F. Rougemont, “Addenda to Volume 2”, in A. Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 732-758.

astronomy, historian, antiquarian, director of theatrical events at Ferrara, and the supervisor of the works in the *Sala*, who knew the works of Manilius, Abu Ma'shar and Pietro d'Abano, the main sources for the frescoes.⁶ Warburg's proposal has generally been accepted in the writings on the *Sala dei Mesi*, but so far not fully investigated by art historians. Charles Rosenberg challenged this attribution on the grounds that Prisciani did not have the status of consultant in astrological matters at Borso's court before 1466 and that others were instructed to inspect the cosmological and astrological manuscripts that were offered to the Duke.⁷ The question of the extent to which Prisciani took part in the design of the decoration of the *Sala* was addressed by Paolo d'Ancona, who referred to Cossa's letter to Borso in which he mentions Prisciani, not defining him as the designer but confirming his presence in the project.⁸ Ranieri Varese argues that the choice of subject matter might be attributed to Prisciani but not the actual layout of the frescoes, or their sequence.⁹ The latter, he suggests, were the outcome of a well disciplined and creative mind that was the "herald of a new approach in the visual arts".¹⁰

The designer of the iconography of the *Sala dei Mesi* thus remains a mystery, and scholars turned to the literary sources in an attempt to decipher the message of its complex top and middle registers. These literary sources seem to derive from an ancient Greek manuscript, the map of the fixed stars and an astronomical and astrological aid,

⁶ A. Warburg, «Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia», 581-582, 584, 586-590; P. d'Ancona, *The Schifanoia Months at Ferrara*, 12, 92-3, 94. Prisciani's writings can be found in Biblioteca Comunale dell' Archiginnasio in Bologna and Archivio di Stato in Modena, and they remain unpublished, save for his treatise on theatre architecture, *Spectacula*, of ca. 1501, published in 1992. The only monograph on him is by A. Rotondò, "Pellegrino Prisciani (1435 ca. – 1518)", *Rinascimento*, 9, 1960, 69-110.

⁷ C. M. Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara during the Reign of Borso d'Este*, 192-195. He addressed this issue again in his article "Francesco Del Cossa's Letter Reconsidered", *Musei Ferraresi – Bollettino Annuale*, no. 5-6, 1975-1976, 11-15, proposing that Prisciani was called to estimate the value of the work or to distribute the payments to the artists. However, if the works on Schifanoia were conducted from ca. 1466 to 1469/70, as Rosenberg established, then we feel that there is no reason to doubt Prisciani's role in the design, as he became Borso's consultant in the matters of astrology around 1466.

⁸ Prisciani's authorship has been based on the evidence given in dell Cossa's letter to Borso, of 1470, «...Ill.mo principe io non voglio esser quello il quale, et a Pelegrino de Prisciano et ad altri venga a fastidio...» (cited, for example, in C. M. Rosenberg, "Francesco Del Cossa's Letter Reconsidered").

⁹ R. Varese, *Il Palazzo di Schifanoia*, Bologna 1992, 26-27. Cesare Gnudi (in P. D'Ancona, *The Schifanoia Months of Ferrara*, 101) also thinks that Prisciani planned the iconographic and theoretical details, but that he was not the designer of the actual pictorial, decorative, concept.

¹⁰ The organic unity of the decoration was, for Varese, *Il Palazzo di Schifanoia*, 27, "the felicitous outcome of a synchronization between the learned men who decided on the subject matter, those who worked out the visual correlative and the layout of the frescoes and the various workshops which executed them". However, we would like to point to the fact that Prisciani was a skilled draughtsman, and that he illustrated his own works (see Figs. 17-19).

Sphaera, devised by Aratus around 300 B.C.¹¹ It traveled from Asia Minor through Egypt to India and found its way, probably via Persia, into a 9th-century astrological manuscript, a compilation of astral magic known in the Arab world, *Ghayat Al-Hakim* (*The Aim of the Sage*), by Abu Ma'shar, who provided not only a survey of three different codifications of the fixed stars – the Arabian, Ptolemaic and Indian – but also the foundation for European medieval astrological and hermetic thought. Enriched by various traditions that added layers of meanings and interpretations, it came to Europe where it was translated into Latin by Johannes Hispalensis, ca. 1133, titled *Introductorium majus*, and then by Pietro d'Abano in 1293, as *Astrolabium Planum*. Yet another Latin translation of *Ghayat Al-Hakim*, known as *Picatrix*, was ordered by Alfonso the Wise ca. 1250 and was greatly influential in Europe in the late 15th century, because it was regarded to be an original Hermetic text.¹²

The Top Register

The top register illustrates the triumphs of the mythological gods and goddesses that, according to ancient Greek and Roman tradition, preside over each month, that is, each zodiacal sign.¹³ The conceptual outline of the cycle is found in a literary source, a didactic astrological poem *Astronomica*¹⁴ by Marcus Manilius, a Roman poet who lived in the 1st century A.D.¹⁵ In *Astronomica* we read:

It is to mark well the tutelary deities appointed to the signs and the signs which Nature assigned to each god, when she gave to the great virtues the persons of the gods and under sacred names established various powers, in order that a living presence might lend majesty to abstract qualities. Pallas is protectress of the Ram, the Cytherean of the Bull, and Phoebus of the comely Twins; you, Mercury, rule the Crab and you, Jupiter, as well as the Mother of the Gods, the Lion; the Virgin with her sheaf belongs to Ceres, and the Balance to Vulcan who wrought it; bellicose

¹¹ In it, a rigorous Greek science has intellectualized the animate creations of the religious imagination and reduced them to functioning mathematical points, says A. Warburg, «Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia», 566.

¹² A. Warburg, «Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia», 567.

¹³ Kristen Lippincott proposes that, since the *De deo Socratis* was widely available in Italy during the mid-fifteenth century, the twelve Olympians were included in the Schifanoia program not merely as zodiacal patrons, but specifically as “celestial benefactors.” K. Lippincott, “The Iconography of the Salone dei Mesi and the Study of Latin Grammar in Fifteenth-century Ferrara”, in M. Pade-L. Waage Petersen – Daniel Quarta (Eds.), *La Corte di Ferrara e il suo mecenatismo 1441-1598, Atti di convegno internazionale Copenhagen maggio 1987*, 104.

¹⁴ Aby Warburg was the first to identify the sources for the elements of the decoration of the *Sala*. His findings have been adopted in subsequent writings on the frescoes.

¹⁵ Goold states Manilius' familiarity with Lucretius, Virgil, Cicero, Homer, all of whom he quotes and from whom he borrows frequently (Manilius, *Astronomica*, “Introduction”, xi-xv).

Scorpion clings to Mars; Diana cherishes the hunter, a man to be sure, but a horse in his other half, and Vesta the cramped stars of Capricorn; opposite Jupiter Juno has the sign of Aquarius, and Neptune acknowledges the Fishes as his own for all that they are in heaven.¹⁶

Each god is accompanied by practitioners of the art which he or she bestowed on mankind, or, as Manilius says, “the characters, the predominant quality, the pursuits, and the different skills which the signs impart.”¹⁷ Such is the case, for example, with weavers that accompany the triumph of Minerva, in March.¹⁸ Speaking of Aries, “the Ram ... rich with an abundance of fleecy wool”, Manilius states that:

¹⁶ Manilius, II, 433-452, 117-119. Manilius first lists the signs in the Book I, 255-274, p. 25-27, saying that they «gleam in every part of heaven», and that from them «the whole scheme of destiny is derived»; the part of universe in which the signs abide «holds the vaults of heaven together.»

Marsilio Ficino interpreted the signs similarly: «In the first sphere across the zodiac we see twelve sidereal animals. In each of these animals shines a principal star, like that animal's heart painted in the sky. The soul of the whole constellation lives life in that heart. This is where the Pythagoreans, accordingly, locate the twelve divine souls: in Aries' heart, Pallas, in Taurus', Venus; in Gemini's, Phoebus 'particular'; in Cancer's, Mercury; in Leo's Jupiter 'particular'; in Virgo's, Ceres; in Libra's, Vulcan; in Scorpio's, Mars; in Sagittarius', Diana; in Capricorn's, Vesta; in Aquarius', Juno; and in Pisces', Neptune.» M. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, Vol. I, Books I-IV, English translation by M. J. B. Allen with J. Warden; Latin text edited by J. Hankins with W. Bowen, The I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2001, 269.

¹⁷ Manilius, IV, 122-124, p. 233. K. Lippincott («The Iconography of the Salone dei Mesi and the Study of Latin Grammar in Fifteenth-century Ferrara», 104) refers to Apuleius, «our attention is drawn to them due to the various benefits they impart to us in the affairs of life over which they preside.»

Marsilio Ficino will adopt this tradition; for him, characteristically, «... the arts were given to humanity by the Gods because of love: the art of ruling by Jupiter; of archery, prophecy, and medicine by Apollo; bronze-work by Vulcan; the art of weaving by Minerva; and music by the Muses. Twelve gods are in charge of the twelve signs of the Zodiac: Pallas of Aries, Venus of Taurus, Apollo of Gemini, Mercury of Cancer, Jupiter of Leo, Ceres of Virgo, Vulcan of Libra, Mars of Scorpio, Diana of Sagittarius, Vesta of Capricornus, Juno of Aquarius, and Neptune of Pisces. By these all the arts are handed down to mankind. The signs infuse the powers for each of the arts into the body, and the Gods who are in charge of them into the soul. So, Jupiter, through Leo makes a man most fit for the governing of Men and Gods, that is, fit to manage well both divine affairs and human; Apollo, through Gemini, teaches prophecy, medicine and archery; Pallas, through Aries, teaches the skill of weaving; Vulcan, through Libra, teaches bronze-working; and the others the rest of the arts. But because the gifts of Providence are showered upon us by His beneficence, we say they are given at the instigation of Love.» Cited from C. V. Kaske, «Ficino and the Gods of the Zodiac», *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 45, 1982, 195. Kaske (pp. 196 ff.) states that Ficino relied on Manilius.

¹⁸ Charles Rosenberg recognized references to Borso's civic accomplishments in this zone. In the triumph of Minerva, he suggested, the introduction of silk and tapestry weaving and the support of the university are represented. On the other hand, the introduction of armour production into Ferrara is referred to in the representation of Vulcan's forgery; the fostering of commerce is alluded to in the triumph of Mercury, and of agriculture in the field with the triumph of Ceres. C. Rosenberg, «Courtly Decorations and the Decorum of Interior Space», 539 fn. 35.

... the fleece ... by a thousand crafts gives birth to different forms of gain: now workers pile into heaps the undressed wool, now card it, now draw it into a tenuous thread, now weave the threads to form webs, and now they buy and sell for gain garments of every kind; no nation could dispense with these, even without indulgence in luxury. So important is this work that Pallas herself has claimed it for her own hands, of which she has judged it worthy, and deems her victory over Arachne a token of her greatness. These are the callings and allied crafts that the Ram will decree for those born under his sign: in an anxious breast he will fashion a diffident heart that ever yearns to sell itself for praise.¹⁹

However, Manilius was not the only literary source for these representations, as Claudia Cieri Via demonstrated in her complex analysis of the attributes of the gods and the mythological and symbolic figures that surround them.²⁰ Models can also be found in other texts, such as *Libellus de Deorum Imaginibus* by Albericus, *Questiones Romanae* by Plutarch, *Genealogia degli Dei* by Boccaccio, Johannes Hispalenses' *Introductorium Majus*, *Astrolabium Planum* of Pietro d'Abano, *Lapidarium* of Alfonso the Wise, and *Picatrix*.²¹

For example, the iconography of the *Triumph of Venus* in the upper part of the month of April does not follow Manilius' description.²² Instead, it shows Venus on the triumphal chariot drawn by swans, with a pair of doves flanking her head, and Mars in armour kneeling in front of her. The scene is happening in the landscape of the Garden of Love, with couples courting and playing music, accompanied by the Three Graces. Cieri Via finds that the iconography of the *Triumph of Venus* is based on three literary sources. One is Albericus' *Libellus de Deorum Imaginibus* in which Venus is described as a beautiful girl with a wreath of white and red roses on her head, accompanied by doves that fly around her and the three Graces. In the second,

¹⁹ Manilius, IV, 125-139, p. 233. Manilius goes on describing the dominant skills of other signs.

²⁰ C. Cieri Via, «I trionfi, il mito e l'amore: la fascia superiore dei Mesi negli affreschi di Palazzo Schifanoia», in R. Varese (Ed.), *Atlante di Schifanoia*, Modena, 1989, 37-55.

²¹ See also, M. Bertozzi, *La tirannia degli astri. Aby Warburg e l'astrologia di Palazzo Schifanoia*, Testi di Aby Warburg, Elsbeth Jaffé, Ranieri Varese, Bologna 1985; A. Warburg, "Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia", 572-581 and G. Bing and F. Rougemont, *op. cit.*, 732-758.

²² This is what Manilius (IV, 140-151) says about Taurus, the protectress of which is Venus: «The Bull will dower the countryside with honest farmers and will come as a source of toil into their peaceful lives; it will bestow, not gifts of glory, but the fruits of the earth. It bows its neck amid the stars and of itself demands a yoke for its shoulders. When it carries the sun's orb on its horns, it bids battle with the soil begin and rouses the fallow land to its former cultivation, itself leading the work, for it neither pauses in the furrows nor relaxes its breast in the dust. The sign of the Bull has produced a Serranus and a Curius, has carried the rods of office through the fields, and has left its plough to become a dictator. Its sons have the love of unsung excellence; their hearts and bodies derive strength from a massiveness that is slow to move, whilst in their faces dwells the boy-god Love.»

Boccaccio's *Genealogia*, her chariot is drawn by swans, and in the third, *Picatrix*, she is described as a woman with an apple in her right hand, in front of whom stands Mars with a chain around his neck. Cieri Via finds that other motifs from *Picatrix* inspired the fresco. According to it, parks and gardens belong to Venus' realm, and we can see them represented in the fresco, as well as gazelles and hares that move among the lovers.²³

However, it seems that Manilius' *Astronomica* has not been really read thoroughly – certainly thanks to the difficult, obscure language of his writing. He does, in fact, describe the swan and the doves in relation to Venus in "Book Five", in which he speaks about different types of personalities produced by the influences of the extra-zodiacal constellations:

When the Archer has fully emerged from the waves, the Swan ascends into heaven with this creature's thirtieth degree, its down and glittering wings figured by stars ... In its own person the Swan hides a god and the voice belonging to it; it is more than a bird and mutters to itself within. Fail not to mark the men who delight to feed the birds of Venus [doves] in pens on a rooftop, releasing them to their native skies or recalling them by special signs ... These and like skills will be the gift of the golden Swan.²⁴

So, it seems that the texts mentioned above, together with Manilius, should be understood as parallels rather than as individual and direct sources for the frescoes in the *Sala dei Mesi*, and it also seems that the text of Manilius' *Astronomica*, taken as the conceptual basis for the decoration of this room, should be read with more attention for details such as the above mentioned. We shall see that Manilius provided the material, at least in part, in at least one more instance that we shall discuss in the following pages.

The Middle Register

The influence of various literary sources is also present in the middle register. Here we find representations of the astrological signs and of the decans, the symbols of the fixed stars. These decans are minor astral elements, ruling over each ten days of the month, that influence those who were born within that particular period.²⁵ The representations of the decans have not been thought to originate from Manilius'

²³ C. Cieri Via, «I trionfi, il mito e l'amore: la fascia superiore dei Mesi negli affreschi di Palazzo Schifanoia», 42-43.

²⁴ Manilius, V, 364-388.

²⁵ There are thirty six decans in all; as a system, according to A. Warburg, «Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia», 565-567, this division originated in ancient Egypt, but the images of the decans come from the Greek pantheon; in their wanderings through Asia Minor, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Arabia and Spain, they lost their Greek clarity of outline and meaning.

scheme, as they seem to derive from ancient Greek, Egyptian, Persian and Arabic traditions and from European medieval interpretations, such as Aratus' *Sphaera*, and the aforementioned *Introductorium Majus* of Johannes Hispalenses, *Astrolabium Planum* of Pietro d'Abano, *Lapidarium* of Alfonso the Wise and *Picatrix*.²⁶

However, we would suggest that at least one of the representations of decans may originate in *Astronomica*: the first decan of Virgo. It represents a female figure with ears of wheat in her raised right hand. Elsbeth Jaffé²⁷ found the literary and visual source for this figure in the ancient Persian and Indian tradition, as well as in Abu Ma'shar, Johannes Hispalenses (his translation of Abu Ma'shar) and *Picatrix*, in which there are some discrepancies concerning the object she is holding in her hand: according to Persian tradition and Abu Ma'shar, she is a woman, with long hair, holding ears of wheat, and according to other sources, she is holding a pomegranate or an unknown object.²⁸ It is true that Manilius does not describe the figure of the first decan of Virgo, but he does state that the "Corn-Ear rises together with the Virgin's tenth degree," meaning in the month's first decan.²⁹

The Month of December. Its State of Preservation

Almost nothing of the decoration of the western wall (the months of October, November and December) survives: of December, we see only the upper part of the fresco with the damaged *Triumph of Vesta*.³⁰ The goddess stands on the chariot, in red dress, with her head made of flames and the remains of the figure of a child in

²⁶ The sum of their influences on the existing parts of the decoration of the *Sala dei Mesi* can be found in M. Bertozzi, *La tirannia degli astri*, 16ff; Also, K. Lippincott, "Gli dei-decani del Salone dei Mesi di Palazzo Schifanoia", in M. Bertozzi, Ed., *Alla corte degli Estensi: Filosofia, arte e cultura a Ferrara nei secoli XV e XVI. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi*, Ferrara, 1992, pp. 181-97. The authors dealing with the decoration of the *Sala* mention these sources occasionally.

G. Magoni, *Le cose non dette sui Decani di Schifanoia. Una lettura astronomica*, Ferrara 1997, analyzed the survived decans in the *Sala* and proved that they correspond to the constellations of the stars designed by Ptolemy. Rosenberg notes that Pellegrino Prisciani had Ptolemy's *Cosmographia* on loan from the ducal library from September 18, 1466 to 1474 (C. M. Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara during the Reign of Borso d'Este*, 194).

²⁷ In M. Bertozzi, *La tirannia degli astri*, 114-134; G. Bing and F. Rougemont, *op. cit.*, 732-758, 737-751.

²⁸ See M. Bertozzi, *La tirannia degli astri*, 61-62, 124; G. Bing and F. Rougemont, *op. cit.*, 748.

²⁹ Manilius, V, 270-273.

³⁰ Vesta (Hestia) is ancient goddess of the hearth, the symbol of domestic religion and piety. Her legend is of little complexity, and so seems to be iconography. It is probable that her worship was conducted without images at all, because the altar on which the flame burned was enough to evoke the idea of her presence. When she was depicted in art, the special care was taken to express her chaste aspect, fully dressed and with covered head. The Romans considered the constellation of the Capricorn to be sacred to Vesta. M. Collignon, *Manual of Mythology, in Relation to Greek Art*, New York, 1982, 162-164; M. McDonald, *Mythology of the Zodiac. Tales of the Constellations*, New York, 2000, 88.

her arms.³¹ The chariot is not being drawn by animals as in other triumphs in the *Sala*, but seems to be standing still in a landscape with mountains, rock formations, and a distant town. Female figures around the chariot and in the distance are engaged in conversation or some other action.³² Especially interesting is the representation of two figures in front of the chariot that seem to be in a running pose, with flowing drapery. They are not pulling the chariot because there are no straps that would suggest it, as seen in representations of other triumphs (for example, the months of March and April). In the distance, on the viewer's left, there is the column with the figure of Mars holding Victory. On Vesta's right side, there is another column with a flame burning on top of it – probably the sacred eternal flame of the Romans, traditionally guarded by the goddess. On the pedestal on which she stands one can recognize the Este lilies, that also appear in the Este coat of arms in the representation of the month of March. There is also Borso's device, the "paraduro," a wooden fence fixed in the water with a gourd attached to it as a water level indicator (used as a defense against the flooding of the river Po).³³ In the central part of the middle register one can still recognize parts of the unicorn's head and his tail, several stars in the form of a wheel (remains of the constellation of Capricorn), sun rays that were painted under the figure of the astrological sign, and remains of two figures of the second decan above the unicorn.

Giuseppe Mazzolani's Drawing

However, we can get a better notion of what this part of the decoration of the *Sala dei Mesi* looked like from drawings made by the Italian painter and conservator Giuseppe Mazzolani in 1903 (today in the Museo civico, Palazzo Schifanoia, Acquisition nos. S/157, S/158, S/159).³⁴ From Mazzolani's drawing we learn that the

³¹ C. Cieri Via noted that this particular form of Vesta is based on the Boccaccio's *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, and that the boy held by Vesta should be the infant Jove, born, according to Boccaccio, by Vesta with Saturnus. C. Cieri Via, "I trionfi, il mito e l'amore: la fascia superiore dei Mesi negli affreschi di Palazzo Schifanoia", 53.

³² G. Bargellesi identified these figures as Vestals in *Palazzo Schifanoia. Gli affreschi nel "Salone dei Mesi" in Ferrara*, Bergamo 1945, 12.

³³ «Paraduro» appears on the ceiling of the *Sala dei Mesi*; it also appears in the manuscripts commissioned by Borso or dedicated to him (H. J. Hermann, "L'età d'oro della miniatura ferrarese" in *La miniatura estense*, Modena, 1994, 77-146). Borso used this image to emphasize his diligence and merits for the improvements that he achieved in Ferrara. For "paraduro" and the impresa of a unicorn that immerses his horn into water, as another symbol of the regulation of water see Y. Kyotani, "Il trionfo di Vesta come Il trionfo della castità. L'analisi iconographica del 'Dicembre' della Sala dei Mesi nel Palazzo Schifanoia", *Schifanoia*, 17/18, 1997, 210-212.

³⁴ See R. Varese, *Arte e copia tra Otto e Novecento. I Mesi di Schifanoia nei dipinti e disegni di Giuseppe Mazzolani*, Ferrara 1989, Figs. 36-38. The drawings are reproduced as one in M. Bertozzi, *La tirannia degli astri*, p. 139, Fig. 60; R. Varese, Ed., *Atlante di Schifanoia*, 225; G. Bing and F. Rougemont, *op. cit.*, 756.

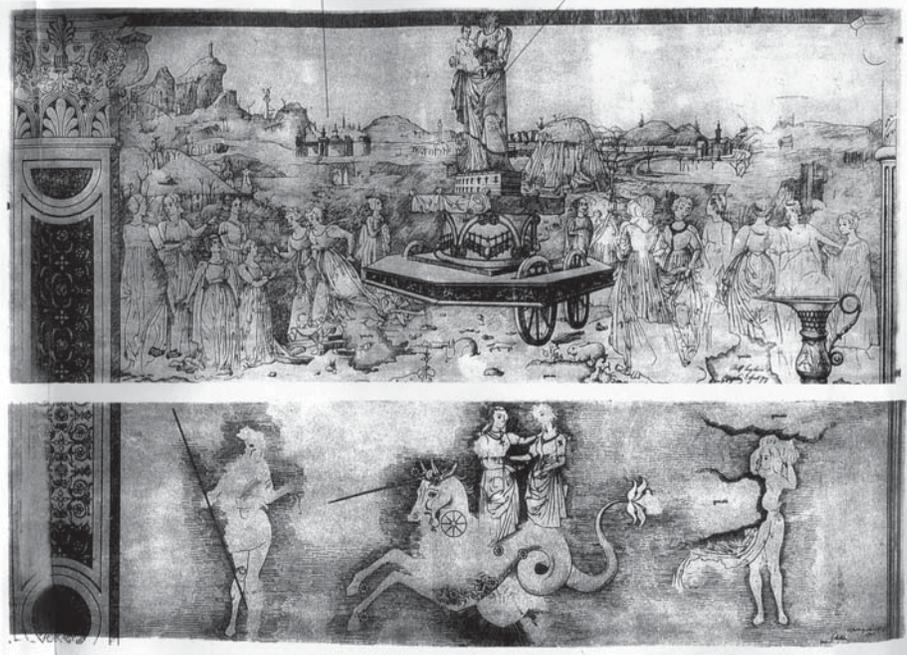


fresco had already decayed substantially, but many of the motifs lost for us today were still clearly visible. For example, we can discern hares, a small animal beneath Vesta's chariot resembling an ermine, and a large vase. We can clearly see the figures of Vesta's companions; two of them, in front of the chariot, seem to be "running," or at least this is what their poses and flowing drapery suggest. One more device is clearly visible on Vesta's chariot: the wheel, a symbol of the neighbourhood of the church of St. Paul in Ferrara, that might have served as a personal device of Borso.³⁵

In the middle register, there is a representation that, in its distribution of motifs, corresponds to other identifiable representations in the middle registers. Here we can see segments with the images of the three decans. The first is a (male) figure in a short tunic, with a lance or a staff, the second is two figures embracing, and the third is a female figure with her hair down and hands up, in an open dress that flows and shows her knees. The astrological sign of December here features, instead of Capricorn, Borso's impresa of the unicorn (his horn is clearly visible).³⁶ The stars

³⁵ We have not found any other representation of this device in the literature that we had at our disposal, and we have not noticed it in the decoration of the ceiling of the *Sala*. It also appears, as we shall see later, instead of stars that mark the constellation of Capricorn.

³⁶ In his triumphal entry into Reggio, upon his institution as Duke of Modena and Reggio and Count of Rovigo, in 1452, there appeared a chariot drawn by artificial unicorns, Borso's own chosen



that define the constellation of Capricorn differ from those on other signs, and are in the shape of the aforementioned wheel. The lower register, with its architectural setting, was not preserved in great detail even then and, judging by the drawing, one cannot say whether or not it contained figures, which the other representations of the months did.³⁷

The State of the Scholarship on the Month of December. The Top Register

Not much has been written about *December*, probably because it has been only partially preserved. What has been written is about the upper register, with the *Triumph of Vesta*. Giacomo Bargellesi was the first to pay attention to it, and to identify the female figures that surround Vesta as “young vestals.”³⁸ Claudia Cieri Via noted that this particular form of Vesta is based on Boccaccio’s *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, in which we read: “They say that no image of her has ever been seen,

device, and bore a palm-tree, among the branches on which sat Charity with her flaming torch. E. G. Gardner, *Dukes and Poets in Ferrara*, 1968, 75.

³⁷ Varese, in *Arte e copia tra Otto e Novecento*, 93, notes that this is a representation of the arch on the street facade of the Palazzo di Corte, today Municipal seat.

³⁸ G. Bargellesi, *Palazzo Schifanoia. Gli affreschi nel “Salone dei Mesi” in Ferrara*, Bergamo, 1945, 12.

which they say is because she is unknown; for if we see a flame, what shall we say its image is?"³⁹ She identifies the child held by Vesta as infant Jove who, according to Boccaccio, was nurtured by her.⁴⁰ Cieri Via further suggests that the principal reference of Vesta to flame can be traced to the root of Greek name *Hestia* "deu-s", meaning "to burn", from which also comes the Latin name *Vesta*. However, Cieri Via further suggests that such meaning that characterizes the divinity can be deduced also from the root of the Sanskrit "vas", from which are derived the Greek verbs "estayai" and "exesthai", meaning "to sit"; thus it derives the primordial meaning of the deity that presides over the hearth and family. In addition, the root "vas" is also connected to the idea of "shining" and "burning", that is, the flame.⁴¹ Kristen Lippincott treated the upper part of the decoration of month of December in the context of the grammarian interests on the Ferrarese court of the 15th century. She interpreted the large vase on the right side of the fresco as a sign for the Latin "vas," the etymology for Vesta according to *Mythographus vaticanus tertius*.⁴² Yoshinori Kyotani, who made the first effort (to my knowledge) to read the iconography of the December wall, interpreted the *Triumph of Vesta* as the *Triumph of Chastity*. He also noted the identification of Vesta as "Dea Romana" in Boccaccio's *Genealogia*.⁴³

Since these authors turned to literary sources for the interpretation of the motifs in this scene, we shall quote a passage from the main, conceptual, source of the decoration of the *Sala*, Manilius, who first defined Vesta as the protectress of Capricorn,⁴⁴ and then turned to the arts that are under Vesta's protection saying:

In her shrine Vesta tends your fires, Capricorn: and from her you derive your skills and callings. For whatever needs fire to function and demands a renewal of flame for its work must be counted as of your domain. To pry for hidden metals, to smelt out riches deposited in the veins of the earth, to fold sure-handed the malleable mass – these skills will come from you, as will aught which is fashioned of silver or gold. That hot furnaces melt iron and bronze, and ovens give to the wheat its final form, will come as gifts from you. You also give a fondness for clothes and wares

³⁹ Cited from G. Bing and F. Rougemont, *op. cit.*, 755 (this passage in Boccaccio derives from Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.298: "neither Vesta nor fire has an image"). See also, C. Cieri Via, "I trionfi, il mito e l'amore: la fascia superiore dei Mesi negli affreschi di Palazzo Schifanoia", 53.

⁴⁰ C. Cieri Via, «I trionfi, il mito e l'amore: la fascia superiore dei Mesi negli affreschi di Palazzo Schifanoia», 53.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² K. Lippincott, «The Iconography of the *Salone dei Mesi* and the Study of Latin Grammar in Fifteenth-century Ferrara», in M. Pade, L. Waage Petersen, D. Quarta (Eds.), *La corte di Ferrara e il suo mecenatismo: 1441-1598, Atti di convegno internazionale, Copenhagen, maggio 1987*, Modena, c. 1990, 101-102.

⁴³ Y. Kyotani, «Il trionfo di Vesta come Il trionfo della castità. L'analisi iconografica del 'Dicembre' della Sala dei Mesi nel Palazzo Schifanoia», *Schifanoia*, 17/18, 1997, 203-214.

⁴⁴ Manilius, II, 445.

which dispel the cold, since your lot falls for all time in winter's season, wherein you shorten the nights you have brought to their greatest length and give birth to a new year by enlarging the daylight hours. Hence comes a restless quality in their lives and a mind which is often changed and floats this way and that; the first half of the sign is the slave of Venus, and that with guilt involved, but a more virtuous old age is promised by the conjoined fish below.⁴⁵

The description found in Manilius clearly does not correspond to the representation of December. In it, there is neither mention of the female figures, nor of Rome, nor of the hares and ermine found in the Mazzolani's drawing. Nor is there a furnace or bread or any suggestion of the domestic interior or domestic activity in the fresco.

The State of the Scholarship on the Month of December. The Middle Register

The representations of the decans in the middle register have not previously been an object of research, and no attempt has been made to identify their literary or pictorial source. Manilius does not suggest their characteristics. The representations of the decans of Capricorn in *Picatrix* do not correspond to those in the middle register of the month of December.⁴⁶

According to Elsbeth Jaffé, the sources for the most of the surviving decans in the *Sala dei Mesi* can be found in the ancient Indian astrological tradition, which, in turn, depends on the Greco-Egyptian astrological tradition.⁴⁷ One of the ancient Indian manuscripts based on this tradition is a Sanskrit astrological poem, the *Yavanajātaka*,⁴⁸ or *Greek Horoscopy of Sphujidvaja*, composed in the 3rd century A.D., as a versification of a prose treatise by a certain Yavaneśvara, or the Lord of the Greeks, which had been translated from Greek between A.D. 71-150.⁴⁹ We shall

⁴⁵ Manilius, IV, 243-258.

⁴⁶ M. Bertozzi, *La tirannia degli astri*, in which the general scheme of the influences of various sources on Shifanoia decans, given by E. Jaffé, is reproduced (its reprint can be found in the G. Bing and F. Rougemont, *op. cit.*, 736-752).

Other literary sources that have been mentioned in the relation to decans in the *Sala dei Mesi* were not accessible to us, so we could not compare them to the representations of the decans on this wall.

⁴⁷ See fn. 33. In addition, Warburg designates a sixth-century Indian manuscript, Varahamihira's *Bṛihat jātaka*, as Abu Ma'shar's unacknowledged source ("Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia", 569).

⁴⁸ The exact translation of the Sanskrit *Yavanajātaka* is *The Story of Death* (transl. Prof. C. Thomas Ault).

⁴⁹ For the translation and commentary on the poem see D. Pingree, «The Indian Iconography of the Decans and Horas», *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 26, 1963, 223-254. Pingree traced the Greco-Egyptian sources of this poem in the chapters in which the images of the decans are described.

here demonstrate that the descriptions of the first and the third decans of December in the *Yavanajâtaka* correspond to the representations of the first and the third decans of December seen in the Mazzolani's drawing.⁵⁰ The description of the decans of the month of December in the Indian text reads like this:

29. The first Decan in Capricorn is the colour of collyrium. His teeth are as terrible as a crocodile's. He is armed with a staff, and his actions are like those of Time and Death. He stands in the middle of a cemetery with an armour of heavy hair and a strong body.

30. The second Decan in Capricorn is a man of blazing splendour whose teeth are dark blue and like a Pisaca's. He is handsome, having bound on his armour, sword, and turban (sirastrana). He wanders about constructing river-embankments, tanks, and aqueducts.

31. The third Decan in Capricorn is a woman with loose hair, a gaping mouth, and a hanging belly. Her red body is tall and thin. She holds a noose in her hand, and wears a winding-sheet. She delights in injury.⁵¹

In the drawing we can see that the first decan of December is a man with a staff and with a strong body, as described in *Yavanajâtaka*. His dress may be a short tunic, but it may also be armour, in which case we can recognize another similarity with the Indian description. The third decan is a woman with a loose hair in both *December* and *Yavanajâtaka*. In both cases she holds something in her hand: perhaps a noose, as stated in *Yavanajâtaka*, but it is difficult to identify it, given the damage to this area. Her dress is flowing, in accordance with the Indian text.

We cannot establish to what extent it may have corresponded to the characteristics of the figures as described in *Yavanajâtaka* since we cannot reconstruct the colour scheme of the middle register of the month of December.⁵² Also, the drawing does

⁵⁰ The surviving decans in the cycle do not correspond to the descriptions of the decans in this manuscript.

⁵¹ D. Pingree, «The Indian Iconography of the Decans and Horas», 247.

⁵² We can assume that the colour scheme in this instance was preserved, if we compare the descriptions of some other decans and their representations in the *Sala*.

For example, the first decan of Aries is described in *Bṛihat jâtaka*: “The first Drekkana of signAries is a man with a white cloth tied round his loins, black, facing a person as if able to protect him, of fearful appearance and of red eyes and holding an ax in his hand. This Drekkana is of the shape of a man and is armed. Mars [Bhauma] is its lord.” In *Introductorium majus* we read: “The Indians say that in this decan a black man arises with red eyes, a man of powerful stature, courage, and greatness of mind; he wears a voluminous white garment, tied around his midriff with a cord; he is wrathful, stands erect, guards, and observes.” We can see that the first decan of Aries in the *Sala dei Mesi* corresponds to details in both descriptions, and we can see to which extent the Indian and Arab tradition corresponded in general, and how they differed in interpretation of certain details (in Arab text this decan has lost his ax, for example). See A. Warburg, “Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia”, 569 ff.

not provide enough evidence for the reconstruction of such details as “teeth ... as terrible as a crocodile’s,” in the case of the first decan, or “a gaping mouth, and a hanging belly,” in the case of the third, but we can assume that the monstrous features of these figures had been avoided, as is the case with other representations of decans in the *Sala dei Mesi*.⁵³

The second decan clearly comes from a different source and different tradition. In the drawing, as well as in the remains of the fresco itself, we can see that at least one of the figures – the one on the left – wears a cross as a pendant on her chain. One more detail distinguishes the representation of the second decan from others; the figures literally stand on the unicorn, while in other cases, the figures of the second decan float above the astrological signs. This may be just a pictorial solution, but may also have some additional significance, yet to be determined.

Finding one more literary source does not create a conclusive understanding of the meaning and the message of the decoration of the *Sala dei Mesi*. It only adds, we believe, to the mystery and uncertainties that surround it, and gives a false impression that the motifs in its decoration had been “picked up” at random, from many various sources. In spite of the efforts of such scholars as Aby Warburg, Gertrud Bing, Claudia Cieri Via, Charles Rosenberg and Kristen Lippincott to make this cycle more comprehensible, the relations between its registers still puzzle us, just as the relationships between the single motifs depicted in them are yet to be discovered.

Our future attention should be directed to the existence of important information that can be deduced from the visual material offered by Giuseppe Mazzolani. A closer examination and comparison between his drawings and the surviving frescoes are needed in order to prove their reliability. Then, further study of the iconography of the scenes that were still visible in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries should be performed in order to allow a more complete reading of the iconography of the cycle as a whole.

On the other hand, and more important, the writings and drawings of the proposed designer of the program of the frescoes, Pellegrino Prisciani, should be examined in a search for the key for the conceptual relations within this cycle. His writings remained mostly unknown, save for his treatise on theatre architecture, *Spectacula* of ca. 1501, and they are scattered among the rich archives of Ferrara, Bologna and Modena.⁵⁴ One can only hope that the program for the decoration of the *Sala* still exists, and that it will someday come to light. Although the emphasis in the literature on this fresco cycle has been on literary sources, one should not neglect the oral tradition that must have played a significant role in their dissemination and development, a tradition that is impossible to reconstruct. That is why we must look for a firm statement of intended purpose and meaning of the decoration of the *Sala dei Mesi*.

⁵³ G. Bing and F. Rougemont, *op. cit.*, 735.

⁵⁴ Prisciani's writings are being preserved in *Archivio di Stato* in Modena.

Резиме

Ангелина Милосављевиц-Аулт

Налази о иконографији декада у представи месеца децембра у Сали месеци (Sala dei Mesi) у Палати Скифаноја у Ферари

Сала месеци (Sala dei Mesi) у Палати Скифаноја у Ферари је ренесансни споменик, чија декорација до данас није потпуно истражена. Sala dei Mesi је декорисана зидним сликама подељеним на дванаест вертикалних секција које су посвећене месецима у години. Тема овог рада је представа месеца децембра на западном зиду сале, од које је остао очуван само тешко оштећени горњи регистар са представом тријумфа римске богиње Весте.

У раду је представљен један од могућих писаних извора за представу астролошких декада месеца децембра, *Astronomica* Маркуса Манилиуса, римског песника из I века н.е. Рад се даље бави представама декада месеца децембра које су се некада налазиле у средњем регистру декорације зида, а које су фланкирале астролошки знак месеца децембра, Јарац. Ове представе декада одговарају опису из древног индијског астролошког рукописа, *Yavanajâtaka* (Књига о смрти), односно текста познатом као Грчки Хороскоп *Sphujidhvaја-е*, старијег од 300. године н.е. Остаје нејасно којим је путем овај извор доспео до петнаестовековне Фераре. Може се веровати да је, као и остали литерарни извори за које се претпоставља да су послужили као основа за иконографију декорације Sala dei Mesi, потекао од античког грчког рукописа, мапе фиксних звезда и астролошког приручника, *Aragus*.