

English version by Elizabeth Thomson

Schifanoia. Month by Month: October-Scorpio

The remains of the sky by Maurizio Bonora

A close examination of the wall corresponding to the month of October with the sign of Scorpio has made it possible to discover highly significant information not only concerning the restoration of the Zodiac sign for this particular month, but of all three signs painted in the western sector. The painter, in order to design the stars, has traced several small circles cutting into the plaster using a metal compass, and subsequently, within these circles, has designed the configurations of the stars for the astrological sign. This technical process, applied only to the middle register of the western wall, is a further detail that proves that the work was carried out by a different workshop. In addition, these stars are further differentiated by the application of stucco in relief, modelled with such geometrical precision as to obtain a central arsis with double facets at the points.

The recomposition of the figure of Scorpio has been made possible by following the position of the stars, even if we have no certainty that the number of little circles identified corresponds exactly with the number of original stars. However, the outline obtained matches the conventional figure of the sign with the curvature of the anterior claws pointing towards the left, and the elongated body with the tail curving upwards. In order to identify the images, it was fundamentally important to know the general orientation of the room, which is from right to left. Two more essential parameters for the reconstruction of the astrological signs are the size, and the figurative and stylistic characteristics of the images. As regards the first, an accurate indication has been conjectured from the fact that the Zodiac strip for each month is divided into three equal parts by strongly demarcated vertical lines that evenly separate the three decans. In addition, the representations of the sign always occupy the central part, which extends into the other two spaces left and right to highlight its complete rule over the three partitions into decades of each Zodiac sign representing the month. This principle has helped to establish the approximate size of the signs, as their excursions into neighbouring decans, although variable, are never particularly pronounced.

With regard to the figurative characteristics of the images, there is a strong naturalism throughout the sequence that has been added to by altering the natural parameters of proportion of the figures which inevitably enlarges several animals in the Zodiac, such as Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces. If the iconographic details of the images of the decans that have come down to us are scanty, the figurative tradition of signs of the Zodiac is so rich that a complete classification

is implausible. By examining the huge amount of evidence, it is clear that artists and artisans used every possible kind of interpretative variation, and cooperated in order to thwart all standardization of signs, even supposing that such a requirement had been stipulated, not only for basic typological characterisations, but also for non-incidental astral apparatus, whose essential parameters that refer to fixed constellations one would have expected to be inalterable. It follows that this extensive astrological imagery can for us have only an indicative value regarding the fundamental structural features to which later rielaborations were able to refer, and from which they could draw inspiration. Reference to the representation of Cancer, the work of the Master of the Wide Open Eyes, has strongly relied on the reconstruction of Scorpio because of the formal similarities they have in common.

Going against tradition which privileges a bird's eye view, Cancer in Schifanoia, symbolized by the classical lobster, is depicted on its side, in a particularly naturalistic and detailed graphic portrayal of the anterior claws close together, and the claws facing the observer in front of the solar disc. As I have demonstrated, the composition is introduced once more, with the due variations, in Scorpio, as is also shown by the contours of the progress of the stars. An iconographic comparison between Palazzo della Ragione in Padova, Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, and the Chapel of the Planets in the Malatesta Monument in Rimini, highlights particularly curious details resulting not only from artistic or speculative choices, but also quite positively from the world of fauna and the environment: in Rimini, the spider crab, one of the most famous crustaceans of the Adriatic coast, replaces the more exotic lobster. Among the most important signs on the central wall, I have discovered the remains of a female head in the second decan, and the graffito of a stick slightly inclined in front of the figure. That this was a portrayal of a naked woman with long hair was arrived at from a comparative analysis of the sources, and is an image that even the followers of Agrippa and Bruno have confirmed, easily steering my reading.

The left side, dedicated to the first decan, held in store the discovery of an engraved groove matching the form of a long stick or spear whose position and inclination indicates it could have leaned on the shoulder of a figure. The first decan of the sign has posed a more complex problem of interpretation because the memory of a headless figure with spear has come down to us in two of the most important and influential sources for Schifanoia: *Picatrix* and the *Lapidary* of King Alfonso X. Albumasar, on the other hand, describes a tall, beautiful feminine figure with the attributes of food, and a beautiful, elegant female figure can be encountered in Agrippa and Bruno. The decision was to accept the double tradition constructing a decan with both figures as the remaining space after placing the male figure with the spear made the positioning of the second figure possible, if not necessary. The area destined for the third decan,

on the right, has revealed nothing more than is visible from the ground, namely, the outline of two animals chasing each other from right to left occupying the entire width of the lower segment of the section.

Starting with the improbable consideration, given the stylistic characteristics of the entire register, that the decan could host only animals positioned at the bottom, the collation of the sources once again offers interesting cues for formulating an alternative hypothesis. Albumasar cites a man with two serpents in his hands, whilst *Picatrix* and the *Lapidary* of Alfonso X describe only animals. The *Astrolabium Planum*, Agrippa and Bruno agree in defining violent scenes of men fighting. The logical inference of the composition determined the decision to include a figure in the vast empty space above the animals, accepting the lesson of Albumasar, who apart from everything else, was such an authority for the authors who planned the Hall of the Months.

Textual and contextual sources for the decans of Scorpio

First decan

Albumasar: “Female figure, tall and beautiful, with attributes of food”.

Astrolabium Planum (1488): “The first face, Mars. Represents strife, sadness, deceit, detractions, perditions and malice”.

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia* (1533): “The first face: A woman rises in a dignified fashion, with two men beside her fighting, and she represents well-being and grace, strife, deceit, calumny, larceny, and loss”.

Giordano Bruno, *Imagines facierum* (1582): “The first face: here is an outline of a shapely woman beautifully dressed, over whom two angry young men are striking each other with sticks. She is beautiful, unfaithful, alluring and evil”.

Second Decan

Albumasar: “Naked woman with long hair moving towards a shore; in her hand a pouch with money in it”.

Astrolabium Planum (1488): “Second face, the Sun: Affronts, desertion, provocation of disputes and wickedness among men, and the protraction of fighting”.

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, *De Occulta Philosophia* (1533): “Second face: A couple, a man and a woman ascending, completely nude, and a man sitting on the ground who has before him two dogs biting each other. They denote disrespect, fraud, betrayal, and the cause of calamity and fights among men”.

Giordano Bruno, *Imagines facierum* (1582): "Second face: A woman is shown, entirely nude, and two men entirely nude; one of the two stands to one side of the woman, the other is lying on the ground playing with a dog. Like the first image, the second is equally treacherous and base".

Third decan

Albumasar: "A man with two identical snakes, or a man with two sticks".

Astrolabium Planum (1488): "Third face, Venus; War, drunkenness and violence, together with fornication and the frenzy of excess".

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia* (1533): "Third face: A man ascending bent on his knees, being beaten by a woman, conveying the meaning of drunkenness, fornication, anger, violence and legal disputes".

Giordano Bruno, *Imagines facierum* (1582): "Third face: There is a man showing his back to a woman who is beating him, and holds his feet with both hands. It signifies undisguised wrath, shameful and violent".

The sky by Marco Bertozzi

Middle register: the three decans with Zodiac sign Scorpio

Third decan (Scorpio III)

There remain traces of a small animal closely chasing another, larger animal. This decan could perhaps be related to the description by *Picatrix* (II, 11), where a horse chased by a hare is mentioned. Even if one thinks that there has been a misinterpretation, *lepus-lupus*, the traces still visible in Schifanoia seem rather to correspond to those of a boar chasing a deer.