

cover story

die pinhen aytal



Recolleccio. Appa



Heaven sent, hell bent

Meet the 37-year-old medievalist, Dr David Juste, whose brief but brilliantly energetic career to date has focused on bringing astrology in from the cold.

Story by Geordie Williamson.





When JC Eade published his 1984 monograph on astrology in English literature, he called it *The Forgotten Sky* — an image as elegant as it is apt for the displacement of that ancient system of divination from its once-central place in European life. Most of us understand the decline in astrology’s standing as being tied to the rise of the modern world, but few appreciate that this new rationalism has often sought to expunge astrology even from its former position, as though it were a blot on science’s escutcheon.

It is only in recent decades that academic historians have returned to the study of astrology, helped by the broad realisation that rationality and irrationality, science and pseudo-science, are not (in Lawrence Stone’s words) “opposite poles but rather points on a spectrum, or even interacting and interconnecting systems of thought”.

Few feel the error of this long inattention more keenly than Dr David Juste, who is the University of Sydney’s new Sesqui Postdoctoral Fellow in the Centre for Medieval Studies. Juste, a Belgian historian of the medieval period, has spent his brief but brilliantly energetic career (he’s only 37) attempting to revive interest in astrology, which he regards as perhaps the most consistent, unified and durable body of beliefs and practices in the Western tradition.

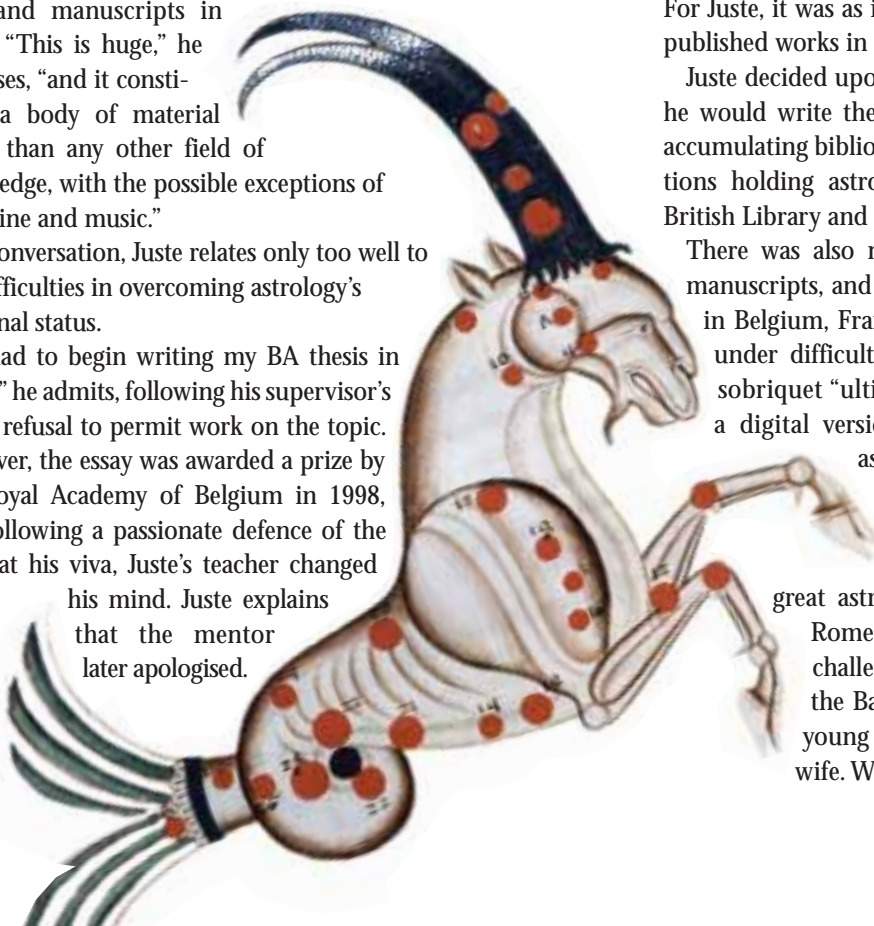
Body of evidence

Juste says that a good way of measuring the importance of astrology in the Middle Ages is to look at the extant literature: 600 to 900 unique astrological texts, preserved in five to ten thousand manuscripts in Latin. “This is huge,” he enthuses, “and it constitutes a body of material larger than any other field of knowledge, with the possible exceptions of medicine and music.”

In conversation, Juste relates only too well to the difficulties in overcoming astrology’s marginal status.

“I had to begin writing my BA thesis in secret,” he admits, following his supervisor’s initial refusal to permit work on the topic. However, the essay was awarded a prize by the Royal Academy of Belgium in 1998, and following a passionate defence of the work at his viva, Juste’s teacher changed

his mind. Juste explains that the mentor later apologised.



“We’re still good friends, I’m glad to say.”

Astrology had been an interest of Juste’s ever since his mother introduced him to the subject as a teenager, but it was this undergraduate success which decided him on an academic path. The BA was followed by an MA in the history of science at Harvard University, a PhD back in Brussels involving a study and critical edition of the *Alchandreana* (the oldest collection of Latin astrological treatises of Arabic origin), followed by three years in London as a Frances A Yates Research Fellow at the Warburg Institute: “a wonderful place – and one of the most amenable to my work as an historian of astrology,” he says fondly.

In the course of his research Juste came to a remarkable conclusion: there existed no catalogue of astrological manu-

“[Professor] Margaret Clunies Ross wrote the most wonderful reply. She was interested in my work, and very much wanted to help me to come to Sydney.”



scripts in Latin, the language through which, from the 10th century onward, the work of ancient astrologers such as Ptolemy was recovered via Islamic texts (Islam was for centuries the repository of much of the ancient world’s scholarship). For Juste, it was as if the 19th century had left no catalogue of published works in the area of natural history.

Juste decided upon a Herculean course of scholarly labour – he would write the catalogue himself. To that end he began accumulating bibliographical data from major research institutions holding astrological manuscripts. These included the British Library and the library of the Vatican.

There was also more isolated material. Small tranches of manuscripts, and important single items, were chased down in Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy and Germany, often under difficult conditions. One friend offered Juste the sobriquet “ultimus clericus” after he managed to finagle a digital version of one of the most significant of all astrological manuscripts, for years overzealously guarded by functionaries of a monastery in rural Spain.

But it was in Munich – the fourth great astrological manuscript centre with London, Rome and Paris – where Juste met his greatest challenge. Juste was cataloguing material held in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek when he met the young Australian woman who was to become his wife. When, in mid 2005, the pair decided to return



photo: Ted Sealy

Dr David Juste ... sees astrology as the black sheep of European thought and culture.

to her home town of Sydney, Juste thought there would be no possible way to go on with his research.

Soon after he married in Brussels, Juste's new mother-in-law sent a clipping from Australia: a University of Sydney advertisement for ten fellowships. The application date had almost passed but, encouraged by his wife, Juste sent emails to test the waters. He grins broadly at the response: "Margaret Clunies Ross [the University of Sydney's McCaughey Professor of English Language and Early Literature, and director of the Centre for Medieval Studies] wrote the most wonderful reply. She was interested in my work, and very much wanted to help me to come to Sydney."

In November 2005 Juste received a three-year fellowship, and began at the University at the beginning of March 2006. His project, a book-length study on the uses of astrology in various sectors of medieval and early modern society and culture, is designed to provide a broad overview of his wider bio-bibliographic efforts. But Juste will be pressed to find time to complete the task in the immediate future. Just before taking up the Sydney role, his catalogue was accepted for publication in multiple volumes by the celebrated Boethius series, published by Steiner Verlag. The books will be the first French-language texts to be published amongst numerous illustrious German scholarly tomes.



The first volume of his *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Latinorum* (after the title of the major catalogue of manuscripts in Greek, the *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum*), covering the manuscripts held in Munich, will appear this year.

The second volume, on manuscripts held by the Bibliothèque nationale de France, will be completed in June, hopefully to be published in 2008. Volumes for the Vatican library and the vast mass of material in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek are both in preparation. "I have to return to Europe several times a year to continue with the work," says Juste, "and I appreciate the flexibility that the Sydney fellowship permits me in this respect."

Juste's 50-year project

Juste has fallen in love with Sydney since his arrival, and would like to be able to continue his research here, but is under no illusions about the scale of his task.

"It will take 50 years," he says. But can any scholarly undertaking be so important as to merit the work of an entire academic career?

"This one is," he insists. "Astrology is not only a discrete field: it flows everywhere. All our early astronomical information, for

One friend dubbed Juste the "ultimus clericus" after he finagled a digital version of one of the most significant of all astrological manuscripts, for years over-zealously guarded by functionaries of a monastery in Spain.

instance, was gathered with astrological enquiry in mind. And the very title, mathematicus, refers to someone trained in both fields. Astrology cannot be extricated from the history of science before the 1700s. It is the black sheep of European thought and culture. The catalogue is a way of bringing it back to the fold."

More than 130 research centres and institutes. Innovative solutions and techniques in science, medicine, sport, business, education, art and culture – benefiting our world, benefiting our society. Continue this tradition today by including the University in your will. Contact us to find out how your wise decision now can have a lasting impact for generations to come.

One wise decision. One lasting legacy.

Bequest Office: The University of Sydney NSW 2006 **T:** +61 2 9036 9036 **F:** +61 2 9036 6150 **E:** bequests@usyd.edu.au

Suspiciendo despicio

Historians of science cannot understand astrology if they begin with a mistrust of its principles.

When the 16th-century Danish nobleman Tycho Brahe used the phrase *suspiciendo despicio* (by looking up I see downward) to explain his astrological enquiries, he was reaffirming belief in an ancient discipline, one that has flourished in the most diverse cultural and political environments for over two millennia. Yet these continuities of doctrine and practice do not mean that astrology has remained static. The challenge for historians has been to identify distinct stages in what might seem an uninterrupted development.

The modern tradition of research into astrology began in the Renaissance, when a number of remarkable scholars, including Kepler and Pico della Mirandola, investigated its early history.

But in the late 17th and 18th centuries astrology lost legitimacy with many thinkers. Figures such as Gibbon and Winckelmann turned away from the cultures of the Hellenistic world and the later Roman empire – the very periods in which astrology most visibly flourished – and rejected astrology as pure superstition, inimical to Renaissance values of empiricism and individualism. It was not until the 20th century, and the recuperative research of Hamburg art historian Aby Warburg, that astrology again became the object of academic enquiry.

The modern astrological revival saw historians and philologists begin a proper examination of the sources for the history of astrology from antiquity onwards. They produced catalogues of manuscripts, critical editions of individual texts, and large-scale surveys of astrological literature.

In the second half of the 20th century, historians of astrology built on this philological tradition. Scholars investigated the intellectual, religious and political careers of astrologers in Renaissance Europe. They also showed how the practice of astrology could serve as a shaping force in politics and statecraft.

Others recreated the practices of astrologers in medieval Europe, using contemporary astrological casebooks to understand how practitioners advised their clientele. Astrology emerges from their research as a rational way of treating seemingly inexplicable and intractable concerns.

These scholars range broadly over different time-periods, drawing upon a huge cast of individuals and bringing to bear a panoply of historical approaches. All share a sense, however, that historians of science cannot understand astrology if they begin with a mistrust of its principles and practitioners. Rather, they seek to understand the factors that made astrology seem a rigorous and credible form of knowledge for so many, for such a long time.

– Geordie Williamson



Astrologist and astronomer Tycho Brahe ... 'by looking up I see downward'.