

Ancient Scholars on the Horoscope of Rome

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Abstract

This contribution analyses the preserved reports on the only attested case in which Greco-Roman scholars practiced technical chronology in combination with astrological history, a branch of celestial divination that was to be developed systematically only later by Persian and Arabic scholars. Passages from Cicero, Plutarch, Solinus and John Lydus allow us to reconstruct how Lucius Tarutius of Firmum, a Roman expert in astral sciences, calculated, at the request of the antiquarian Varro, the exact dates of the conception and birth of Romulus as well as that of the foundation of Rome. Particular emphasis is given to the question of why Tarutius departed from the traditional foundation date in April 753 BCE in favor of an earlier date in October 754 BCE. It is also argued that Lucan's famous speech of Nigidius Figulus (Lucan. 1.639-672) may well contain a hitherto overlooked intertextual allusion to Tarutius' horoscope of Rome.

In the 16th century European scholars first recognized and pointed out the difference between two auxiliary disciplines of historiography that had long been practised together: technical chronology and astrological history.¹ Technical chronology uses ancient reports of eclipses of the sun and moon to determine absolute dates of ancient historical events. It is still today the central pillar on which our chronology of the Greco-Roman world and the ancient Near East is based. Astrological history is equally based on the movements of the heavenly bodies, but – unlike technical chronology – it assumes that these movements have an influence on human history. Astrological history was systematically developed by Persian and Arabic scholars and enjoyed a large reception in the Latin

¹ See Anthony T. Grafton and Noel M. Swerdlow, 'Technical Chronology and Astrological History in Varro, Censorinus and Others', *Classical Quarterly* n.s. (1985) [hereafter Grafton – Swerdlow, 'Chronology'], vol. 35, pp. 454-65; and by the same authors: 'The Horoscope of the Foundation of Rome', *Classical Philology* (1986) [hereafter Grafton – Swerdlow, 'Horoscope'], vol. 81, pp. 148-53.

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