PREFACE

Magic, philosophy, science and theology combine in strange ways in the thinking of the last centuries of the Roman empire. For some time the study of these complexities had been one of my main interests. The example of Firmicus Maternus was suggested to me by Professor Larissia Bonfante Warren of New York University.

Firmicus seemed worthy of note for many reasons. He is almost alone as author of works produced both before and after an apparent conversion to Christianity. He was a typical intellectual of his day, having a smattering of literary knowledge yet with a full-blown command of rhetorical devices; at the same time, in his earlier years he was a staunch devotee of individual astrology and rigid fatal determinism, which he combined with the more ordinary philosophical outlook of his period—a mystic blend of Stoicism and Neo-Platonism. He left a lengthy handbook detailing the astrological practices of his day, the only work which has come down to us in its entirety out of numerous astrological treatises written in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, of which only fragments remain. Furthermore, this manual was important not only because it was the first effort of its kind in the Western world, but because it was the channel for astrological lore to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Finally, although much attention has been paid to the Christian writings of Firmicus, little study has been applied to his Mathesis outside of that by a handful of French and German scholars one or two generations ago.

As a preliminary study of Firmicus, it seemed useful to furnish a translation of the complete manual for the growing number of scholars outside the classical disciplines—researchers who work with social history and the history of ideas, as well as the historical backgrounds of astronomy, mathematics, and astrology.

I am grateful to Professor Warren, not only for calling my attention to this book, but for her constant concern with the progress of the work. I am also grateful to Professor Claireve Grandjouan for her encouragement, to Dr. Tamara Green, Mr. William Mayer, and Mrs. Eirene Christodoulou for their help in verifying and proofreading the text, and to Miss Marjorie Venit, who took great pains with the diagrams. Miss Serinity Young very kindly read the translation and checked it for modern astrological terminology. To Miss Gretchen Clumpner, finally, my deepest thanks for her able deciphering and typing of the entire manuscript.

Jean Rhys Bram
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Introduction

THE AUTHOR

Julius Firmicus Maternus is known to us as the author of two works of the fourth century A.D. The first, *Matheseos Libri VIII* (Eight Books of the *Mathesis*, or Theory of Astrology) stands as the final, as well as the most complete, work on astrology of the Classical world. The other (*De Errore Profanarum Religionum*), written about ten years later, is a bitter attack on the mystery religions from a Christian point of view. Since the astrological work is strongly imbued with pagan philosophical attitudes, we could assume Firmicus was converted to Christianity between the writing of the two works. The second book, however, contains no positive Christian doctrine; it is purely a polemic against the mysteries, which had also been condemned in the *Mathesis*. In his discussion of astrology Firmicus contends that it is a pure and high form of philosophy, far more serious than the usual pagan rites. He bases his argument on the Stoic concept of *sympatheia* which claims that there is an intimate relationship between all parts of the universe, including the stars and mankind.

In Firmicus' own account we hear of two smaller books (*singulares libri*) by him, one on the Ruler of Time (*Math. IV, 20, 2*), the other on the End of Life (*Math. VII, 7, 14*). He also mentions (*Math. VIII, 8, 14*) one he intended to write on the *Myriogenesis*, that is, the influence of individual degrees of the zodiac. No trace of these shorter writings remains.

Doubts as to the single authorship of the *Mathesis* and *De Errore* have been dispelled for most scholars by the careful study of vocabulary and *clausulae* (rhythmic sentence endings) by Clifford H. Moore (*Julius Firmicus Maternus der Heide und der Christ*, Diss. Munich, 1897).

From the internal evidence *De Errore* can be shown to have been written about 346 and the *Mathesis* to have been begun in 334. An eclipse of the sun of July 17, 334 is mentioned in the first book of the *Mathesis*.

No other facts are known about Firmicus Maternus except what
appear in his writings. He calls himself a Sicilian and was probably from Syracuse. His style shows the influence of the so-called African Latin, somewhat similar to that of Apuleius, the author of *The Golden Ass*. This style is characteristic of Sicily as well as of Roman Africa.

We learn from Firmicus' own account (*Math. IV, Proemium*) that he had practiced law for many years but finally gave it up for scholarly pursuits. The manuscripts call the author either *Senator, Vir Clarissimus*, or *Vir Consularis*. It is well known that the emperor Constantine was less hostile to the senatorial class than his predecessor Diocletian and in fact greatly increased its numbers, admitting its members to high office and choosing from among them his special followers. Firmicus does not appear to have been of an old senatorial family, so he may have been one of the newly-created senators. There is even a possibility that he was one of the senators created for the new capital at Constantinople, since he opens the *Mathesis* with an account of a long and circuitous journey back to Italy.

No record exists of high administrative or military posts for Firmicus, but he was on friendly terms with his patron, Lollianus Mavortius, a high government official who is mentioned twice by the historian Ammianus Marcellinus (330–395 A.D.) and whose promotions are recorded in a series of inscriptions.

As a Sicilian Firmicus would have been fluent in Greek. Most if not all of the *Mathesis* is derived from Greek sources. The style of both his books shows a thorough grounding in the rhetorical training current in Greek and Roman schools of the time. He takes pains to display his wide, though somewhat superficial, erudition. He had, in other words, a typical gentleman's education.

One may reconstruct that Firmicus, as a wealthy, retired lawyer of senatorial rank, was an upper class litterateur with an interest in philosophy and science, leaning more toward Stoic and Neo-Platonic teachings, as would be fitting for his astrological interests. One must remember that at least from the time of the scientist Ptolemy (second century A.D.) astrology had been linked with the most reputable scientific doctrine, and that fatal determinism was an integral part of Stoic world outlook. The question of how far one should surrender to Stoic determinism had been a subject of high-level philosophic argument from Hellenistic times. The *Mathesis* shows that its author adheres to the extreme position. He fiercely attacks compromisers as well as opponents of his theory and scorns the idea of some philosophers that Fate may control some parts of human life but not others.

**THE MATHESIS**

The *Mathesis* can be regarded as a summation of the trends of the fourth century, one of the last great statements of the thoughts and
feelings of pagan Rome. In common with all the products of its age, such as the imperial villa at Piazza Armerina on Sicily's east coast, it displays realism and fantasy, magnificence and awkwardness.

Firmicus has browsed superficially through much of the ancient literature, as was expected of an educated man of his period, and he uses every occasion to show his erudition. The writings of the end of the Empire have little urge to originality but show rather a desperate grasping at links with the past. Thus the whole work of the *Mathesis* is composed of snippets of late Hellenistic science and star-lore, much of it attributed to legendary wisdom from the ancient East. The cement holding it all together is also in the fourth century tradition—purple passages embroidering familiar themes from literature and philosophy, built on the strict tenets of the schools of rhetoric. The ideology is a mixture of Neo-Platonic and Stoic with a high moral tone, for this is an ascetic century among pagans as well as among Christians. The passage at the end of Book Two describing the attitudes of a practitioner of astrology could have been written of a Christian prelate as well as a Neo-Platonic philosopher. The old pagan gods appear only as literary flourishes, but there are moving invocations to the only slightly anthropomorphized heavenly bodies, especially to the new Roman supreme deity, the Unconquered Sun.

The first half of the fourth century after the irreparable losses of the third was a time less sophisticated but less turbulent, an age in which the new Rome and newly recognized Christianity gave promise of stability and progress.

This age which took itself so seriously shows only a few writers. It is a period of adjustment, soon to be followed by a last flowering of Latin literature, both pagan and Christian. Later fourth and fifth century authors felt a need to turn into Latin much of the wisdom and poetry which had come to be written more often in Greek in the recent centuries. Firmicus is a forerunner of this trend when he says he intends to put into Latin “for our Romans” the wisdom of the ancients.

Wide-eyed like early fourth century portraits, noble in intent and sometimes in execution, meticulously and rigidly organized in numbers which correspond to the heavenly bodies, the *Mathesis* appears to us as an explicit marker along the history of ideas.

But it is not only for the history of ideas—of his own time and the times he influenced—that we value the *Mathesis*. It also constitutes an extraordinary historical document, not necessarily for Firmicus' own lifetime, since he drew heavily on Hellenistic, often Egyptian or Syrian sources; but as a means of recapturing the thoughts, life styles, ambitions, and occupations of the restless, upwardly mobile people of the eastern Mediterranean between the times of Alexander and Constantine. Neither great literature nor great art nor the carefully recovered pots and pans of a modern excavation can show us as the *Mathesis* does the range of
problems, illnesses, windfalls, and successes of the people history neglects. These are not the tax-crushed, caste-bound populations of the Theodosian code. They are rather the vigorous, scheming, superstitious crowds of the back streets of Alexandria and Ostia, the ones we catch a glimpse of in the *Satyricon* and the columbarian reliefs of the Isola Sacra, or in the contracts and letters recovered in the late papyri.

Only the mysticism and supernaturalism of the fourth century is missing in Firmicus. He has no interest in after-life or desire for miraculous salvation or communication with the "One." He believes he is coldly scientific in his adherence to fatal determinism. This may be the secret of his hostility to the mystery religions—they, together with Christianity, offered a release by miracle from the "wheel of Fate." To Firmicus fatal determinism is reassuring even when unfavorable, as is the Stoic doctrine of kinship in all aspects of the universe. Astrology is not only reassuring in its revelation of immutable natural law, but it is heady since it promises a way to eavesdrop on cosmic secrets; but only, according to Firmicus, if one follows all the rules with mathematical rigidity.

Growing as we see it in Firmicus from the intellectual exploration of the Hellenistic Mediterranean, the security and excitement of the *Mathesis* were to weather the Christian reassurance of the *City of God*. Despite official disapproval, it was quietly copied and preserved in monasteries, re-emerged as one of the first printed books, sparked the astrological enthusiasm of the Renaissance, and reached us in an age which again turns to both the reassurance and headiness of philosophies which promise an understanding of man's place in the universe.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF ASTROLOGICAL METHODS**

Numerous Hellenistic works on astrology were available to Firmicus as source material. Several—Manetho, Dorotheos of Sidon, Antiochos of Athens (see list of ancient authors)—have come down to us only in fragments. One, almost complete, is a kind of diary of a practicing astrologer of the Near East, Vettius Valens. Almost contemporary with Vettius was the great work of Ptolemy known as *Tetrabiblos*, a sequel to his astronomical *Syntagma* (*Almagest*). Ptolemy's work gives a brief theoretical background for astrology but does not offer guidance for practice as do Vettius and Firmicus.

Astrology as Firmicus knew it involved the drawing of horoscopes for individuals and presenting lifetime predictions based on the configuration of the heavens at birth. It appears to have developed from a combination of Mesopotamian star observation and Greek mathematics, possibly in Ptolemaic Egypt. The tendency of the Hellenistic and Roman periods to attribute the origins of their science and philosophy to various places in the ancient East led to the listing of such names as Anubis, Zoroaster, and Asclepius as fathers of astrology.
Introduction

What was probably one of the earliest manuals of astrological techniques was drawn up in Alexandria around 150 B.C. and given the names of a sixth century Pharaoh, Nechepso, and his scribe Petosiris.

Meanwhile Greek scientists such as Eudoxos (390–340 B.C.) and Hipparchos (190–126 B.C.) were lending to the art of astrology the prestige of their discoveries. Stoic *sympatheia* took in astrology as part of its credo. Star-lore gained a wide audience through the poem on the constellations, the *Phaenomena*, by Aratus (315–240 B.C.). It was based on materials of Eudoxos, commented upon by Hipparchos, translated into Latin by Cicero and by Germanicus, the emperor Tiberius' nephew.

Interest in mathematical astrology reached Rome in the first century B.C. In Cicero's circle of friends Varro and Nigidius Figulus wrote works on the subject, now lost. Although Cicero's teacher, the Stoic Panaetius, encouraged Cicero to argue against the doctrine of Fate, Posidonius, the great Stoic leader, lent his enormous influence to the cause of determinism and astrology. The first emperor, Augustus, skillfully took advantage of a comet he called the *Sidus Julium* (Star of Julius) to promote the catasterism (transformation into a star) of Julius Caesar, "the Divine Julius." Under Augustus and Tiberius an otherwise unknown Manilius published a long poem on the astrological divisions of the heavens (ed. A. E. Housman, Cambridge, 1937).

The friend and confidant of Tiberius, Thrasyllus, philosopher and astrologer, wrote a lengthy work on astrology of which an epitome is known in fragments. He was perhaps the father-in-law of that Balbillus who fulfilled the same post for Nero. The Roman emperors were almost without exception deeply concerned with astrological predictions but, at the same time, for obvious political reasons, encouraged legislation against its practitioners (Frederick H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics*, Philadelphia, 1954).

At no time had the Empire banned astrological studies, only their practical application in the casting of individual horoscopes, and then only at Rome. Under Augustus' edict of A.D. 11 astrological consultation in regard to the Emperor could be prosecuted as literary treason, as could any other writing about the person of the Emperor.

After the reorganization of Diocletian (284 A.D.) the divinity of the Emperor and his relationship to the heavenly bodies became a matter of doctrine, so that it is not surprising to find Firmicus arguing (*Math. II*, 30) that it is not only illegal but impossible to make a prediction in regard to the life of the Emperor since he belongs to a power higher than the stars.

Within a generation after Firmicus there was a general ban on all kinds of divination within the Empire. Such legislation, however, was enforced only during periods of acute unrest and political turmoil.