

THE ATTIC NIGHTS
OF AULUS GELLIUS

BOOK XIV

A. GELLII
NOCTIUM ATTICARUM
LIBER QUARTUS DECIMUS

I

Dissertatio Favorini philosophi adversus eos qui Chaldaei appellantur, et ex coetu motibusque siderum et stellarum fata hominum dicturos pollicentur.

- 1 ADVERSUM istos qui sese "Chaldaeos" seu "genethliacos" appellant ac de motu deque situ stellarum dicere posse quae futura sunt profitentur, audivimus quondam Favorinum philosophum Romae
- 2 Graece disserentem egregia atque inlustri oratione; exercendi autem, non ostentandi, gratia ingenii, an quod ita serio iudicatoque existimaret, non habeo dicere. Capita autem locorum argumentorumque quibus usus est, quod eius meminisse potui, egressus ibi ex auditione prope adnotavi, eaque fuerunt ad hanc ferme sententiam: disciplinam istam Chaldaeorum tantae vetustatis non esse quantae videri volunt, neque eos principes eius auctoresque esse, quos ipsi ferant, sed id praestigiarum atque officiarum genus commentos esse homines aeruscatos et cibum
- 3 quaestumque ex mendaciis captantes. Atque eos,

¹ Literally, calculators of nativities; see also note on i. 9. 6.

² p. 44, Marres.

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BOOK XIV

I

A discourse of the philosopher Favorinus directed against those who are called Chaldaeans, and who profess to tell men's fortunes from the conjunction and movements of the stars and constellations.

AGAINST those who call themselves "Chaldaeans" or "astrologers,"¹ and profess from the movements and position of the stars to be able to read the future, I once at Rome heard the philosopher Favorinus discourse in Greek in admirable and brilliant language. But whether it was for the purpose of exercising, not vaunting, his talent, or because he seriously and sincerely believed what he said, I am unable to tell; but I promptly jotted down the heads of the topics and of the arguments which he used, so far as I could recall them immediately after leaving the meeting, and they were about to this effect:² That this science of the Chaldaeans was not of so great antiquity as they would have it appear; that the founders and authors of it were not those whom they themselves name, but that tricks and delusions of that kind were devised by jugglers and men who made a living and profit from

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quoniam viderent terrena quaedam inter homines caelestium rerum sensu atque ductu moveri, quale est quod oceanus quasi lunae comes cum ea simul senescit adolescitque, hinc videlicet sibi argumentum ad suadendum paravisse ut crederemus omnia rerum humanarum et parva et maxima, tamquam stellis
4 atque sideribus evincta, duci et regi. Esse autem nimis quam ineptum absurdumque, ut, quoniam aestus oceani cum lunae curriculo congruit, negotium quoque alicuius, quod ei forte de aquae ductu cum rivalibus aut de communi pariete cum vicino apud iudicem est, ut existimemus, id negotium quasi
5 habena quadam de caelo vinctum gubernari. Quod etsi vi et ratione quapiam divina fieri potest, nequaquam id tamen censebat in tam brevi exiguoque vitae spatio quantovis hominis ingenio comprehendi posse et percipi, set coniectari pauca quaedam, ut verbo ipsius utar, *παχυμερέστερον*, nullo scientiae fundo concepto, sed fusa et vaga et arbitraria, qualis longinqua oculorum acies est per intervalla media
6 caligantium; tolli enim quod maxime inter deos atque homines differt, si homines quoque res omnis
7 post futuras praenoscerent. Ipsam deinde siderum stellarumque observationem, quam esse originem scientiae suae praedicarent, hautquaquam putabat
8 liquide consistere. "Nam si principes Chaldaei, qui in patentibus campis colebant, stellarum motus et

¹ In a rough and ready, superficial manner.

their lies. And since they saw that some terrestrial phenomena known to men were caused by the influence and control of the heavenly bodies, as for example the ocean, as though a companion of the moon, grows old and resumes its youth along with her—from this, forsooth, they derived an argument for persuading us to believe that all human affairs, both the greatest and the least, as though bound to the stars and constellations, are influenced and governed by them. But Favorinus said that it was utterly foolish and absurd to suppose, because the tide of the ocean corresponds with the course of the moon, that a suit at law which one happens to have about an aqueduct with his neighbours, or with the man next door about a party wall, is also bound to heaven as if by a kind of chain and is decided by the stars. But even if by some divine power and purpose this could happen, yet he thought that it could by no means be grasped and understood in such a brief and scant span of life as ours by any human intellect, but he believed that some few things were conjectured *παχυμερέστερον* (to use his own term), that is, “somewhat roughly,”¹ with no sure foundation of knowledge, but in a loose, random and arbitrary manner, just as when we look at objects far away with eyes blinded by their remoteness from us. For the greatest difference between men and gods was removed, if man also had the power of foreknowing all future events. Furthermore, he thought that even the observation of the stars and constellations, which they declared to be the foundation of their knowledge, was by no means a matter of certainty. “For if the original Chaldaeans,” said he, “who dwelt in the open plains, watched the movements and orbits of the stars their

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vias et discessiones et coetus intuentes, quid ex his
efficeretur observaverunt, procedat," inquit, "haec
sane disciplina, set sub ea modo inclinatione caeli,
sub qua tunc Chaldaei fuerunt; non enim potest,"
inquit, "ratio Chaldaeorum observationis manere, si
quis ea uti velit sub diversis caeli regionibus. Nam
quanta," inquit, "partium circulatorumque caeli ex
devergentia et convexionibus mundi varietas sit,
9 quis non videt? Eaedem igitur stellae, per quas
omnia divina humanaque fieri contendunt, sicuti non
usquequaque pruinas aut calores cient, sed mutant et
variant tempestatesque eodem in tempore alibi placi-
das, alibi violentas movent, cur non eventa quoque
rerum ac negotiorum alia efficiunt in Chaldaeis, alia
10 in Gaetulis, alia aput Danuvium, alia aput Nilum? Per
autem,"¹ inquit, "inconsequens, ipsum quidem cor-
pus et habitum tam profundi aeris sub alio atque alio
caeli curvamine non eundem manere, in hominum
autem negotiis stellas istas opinari idem semper osten-
11 dere, si eas ex quacumque terra conspexeris." Prae-
terea mirabatur id cuiquam pro percepto liquere, stel-
las istas quas a Chaldaeis et Babyloniiis sive Aegyptiis
observatas ferunt, quas multi "erraticas," Nigidius
"errones" vocat, non esse plures quam volgo diceren-
12 tur; posse enim fieri existimabat ut et alii quidam
planetes pari potestate essent, sine quibus recta

¹ autem enim, Q; enim, *Hertz*.

¹ Fr. 87, Swoboda; the reference is to the planets.

separations and conjunctions, and observed their effects, let this art continue to be practised, but let it be only under the same inclination of the heavens as that under which the Chaldaeans then were. For the system of observation of the Chaldaeans cannot remain valid, if anyone should wish to apply it to different regions of the sky. For who does not see," said he, "how great is the diversity of the zones and circles of the heavens caused by the inclination and convexity of the earth? Why then should not those same stars, by which they maintain that all human and divine affairs are affected, just as they do not everywhere arouse cold and heat, but change and vary the weather, at the same time causing calm in one place and storm in another—why should they not, I say, produce one series of affairs and events in the land of the Chaldaeans, another among the Gaetulians, another on the Danube, and still another on the Nile? But," said he, "it is utterly inconsistent to suppose that the mass and the condition of this vast height of air does not remain the same under one or another region of the heavens, but that in human affairs those stars always indicate the same thing from whatever part of the earth you may observe them." Besides, he expressed his surprise that anyone considered it a certainty that those stars which they say were observed by the Chaldaeans and Babylonians, or by the Egyptians, which many call *erraticae*, or "wandering," but Nigidius called *errones*, or "the wanderers,"¹ are not more numerous than is commonly assumed; for he thought it might possibly be the case that there were some other planets of equal power, without which a correct and

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