

Scot [Scott], Michael

(*d.* in or after 1235)

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Scot [Scott], Michael (*d.* in or after 1235), translator, philosopher, and astrologer, may have been a member of the Scott family of Balwearie, near Kirkcaldy, in Fife. His date of birth is unknown.

Life and career

About 1210 Scot went to Toledo, where, with one Abuteus 'the Levite', he translated scientific and astrological texts from Arabic into Latin. In 1215 he accompanied Archbishop Rodrigo of Toledo to Rome for the fourth Lateran Council, in particular to discuss with the pope the designation of primacy for the archbishopric of Toledo. Following his return to Spain, Scot completed his translation of the *De motibus celorum* of al-Bitruġi (Alpetragius) on 18 August 1217; he refers to this when sending to Étienne de Provins his Latin version of Averroes's commentary on Aristotle's *De caelo et mundo*. This communication is significant because Étienne was a member of the commission at Paris appointed by Pope Gregory IX to censor Aristotle's writings on natural philosophy; it was through his contacts with Paris that Scot received the title 'magister'—Lynn Thorndike has suggested that he taught there in 1230, giving lessons on the *Tractatus de sphaera* of John de Sacrobosco.

In the autumn of 1220 Scot moved from Toledo to Bologna, where he worked on a compilation of gynaecological diagnoses. It was here that he met the philosopher Orlando da Cremona and also the emperor Frederick II, whose employment he was subsequently to enter, helping Frederick with researches into birds as well as acting as the emperor's astrologer and physician. About 1230 Scot translated at Frederick's court the *Abbreviatio Avicenne de animalibus*, which he dedicated to the emperor. The work is based upon Aristotle, several of whose works Scot translated, though conflicting attributions make it impossible to identify all of them with certainty. However, it would appear that he translated the *Historia animalium*, the *De caelo et mundo*, and the *De anima*, and perhaps also the *Physics*; the Graeco-Latin version of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the translation from Arabic into Latin of commentaries on Aristotle by Averroes have also been attributed to him. Such ascriptions are uncertain. The translation of Averroes's commentary on Aristotle's *De anima* contained in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Lat. 14385, fols. 133–160v, is indeed there specifically ascribed to Scot, but here and elsewhere it remains possible that the work is that of a collaborator. Nevertheless, Scot has been claimed as one of the first exponents of the philosophy of Averroes in western Europe, despite the fact that there are few open references to the teachings of Averroes in his works, and that, indeed, Scot declared himself an opponent of the theory of the eternity of the world.

The fact that Scot was a scholar in the service of Frederick II did not affect his standing with the papacy. In January 1224 Pope Honorius III, describing Scot as one who 'flourishes among other men of learning with a singular gift of learning' (Thorndike, *Michael Scot*, 33), asked Archbishop Langton of Canterbury to give him a benefice, and later that year Scot was offered the archbishopric of Cashel in Ireland, though he declined it on the grounds that he did not know the language of that country. In 1225 he was licensed to hold an additional benefice in England and two in Scotland. In 1227 Gregory IX praised Scot's translations of Arabic and Hebrew texts into Latin. However, neither Albertus Magnus, who cast doubts upon Scot's understanding of Aristotle, nor Roger Bacon, writing towards the end of the thirteenth century, entirely shared the admiration expressed by successive popes, and Bacon declared that Scot had claimed translations as his own while having no knowledge of the languages or sciences in question. Bacon did, however, credit Scot with making known the works of Aristotle in the years around 1230.

Little else is known about the course of Scot's life, and his personality remains elusive, though an autobiographical element has been claimed for passages in his *Liber introductorius*, describing the man born under Mercury as a great reader and possessed of wide curiosity, who takes an interest in such things as painting and sculpture at the same time as he pursues wide-ranging studies in science and magic. There is also considerable uncertainty concerning the date of Michael Scot's death. The poet Henry of Avranches, writing early in 1236, refers to Scot (whom he describes as a second Apollo) as being lately dead; but this is contradicted by the Hebrew astrologer Juda ben Salomon ha-Cohen, who tells of his corresponding with Scot for ten years from 1233, thereby putting the date much later. Scot may have returned to England in 1235, accompanying Piero della Vigna on his mission to arrange the marriage of Henry III's sister Isabella to Frederick II. He has also been improbably identified with the Master Michael of Cornwall 'called Scot' who was chancellor to Jean and Mathilde de Chartres in 1252–3. An abridgement of Scot's *Liber introductorius*, which introduces astrological material from after the death of King Manfred in 1266 (Kues, Spitalbibliothek, MS 209), is attributed to one William Scot, and it is possible that an M could have been mistaken for a W.

Writings: the *Liber introductorius* and the nature of the universe

At the centre of Scot's own work stands his *Liber introductorius*, written to serve as an introduction to the study of astrology, but also presenting its author's understanding of the relationship between microcosm and macrocosm. It has four interrelated sections: an introduction or 'Prohemium', followed successively by the *Liber introductorius* proper, in the form of a book of four 'distinctions', or divisions, said to have been composed at the emperor's request, the 'Liber particularis', also written at Frederick's request, and the *Liber phisionomie*, dedicated to Frederick II, and the only part of the work to have been printed. Later in the thirteenth century his writings influenced both Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum doctrinale* (book I, chap. 1) and books III and IV of Bartholomew Anglicus's *De proprietatibus rerum*, which summarize Scot's reasoning on the soul. Indeed, the format of Scot's *Liber introductorius* was exactly followed by the latter author.

The 'Prohemium' of Scot's work includes questions previously discussed in the *Elucidarium* of Honorius Augustodunensis (Honorius of Autun) in the first half of the twelfth century: the causes of divine action; the disposition of heaven and earth; the role of animals and of man; the work of angels. Here, in addition, Scot elevates astrology to a position inferior only to theology. After this introduction, based largely on twelfth-century encyclopaedism, comes the 'Liber quattuor distinctionum', with its 'new' astrological and philosophical subjects. In the 'four parts' are, respectively: 1) the properties of the planets and their influence on man's actions; 2) a treatise on musical harmony; 3) an analysis of the problems involved in the use of astrology and suggested answers to questions put in consultations; 4) the nature and the qualities of the soul.

The universe as described by Scot is conceived in Aristotelian terms, as enclosed by the nine spheres and surrounded by the waters above the heavens; all creatures exist within this universe thanks to the First Cause, a thesis derived from the pseudo-Aristotelian *Liber de causis*. As the earth is the lowest part of the firmament, the constituents of which matter is made there are less noble; they are, in fact, called *elementata* or secondary elements, to distinguish them from the pure elements to be found in the higher spheres of the firmament.

The properties of nature may be used by all rational creatures: angels, devils, and the human soul. The angels provide the necessary link between macrocosm and microcosm, between man and God. The universe also contains evil spirits; the 'Liber quattuor distinctionum' relates the actions of the demons who love blood, both that of men and of their own kind. Those who practise necromancy are allied with these demons, and although this art is condemned, Scot admits that those who practise magic can use it for the purposes of good. However, he also warns that practising this science involves the risk of encountering those evil angels who cause famine, war, and pestilence, and who are summoned by the invocations of irreligious women. Set against these evil demons and their powers are the good angels, whose job it is to lead the human soul towards eternity, whether in hell, purgatory, or heaven.

The astrologer's art

In the 'Liber quattuor distinctionum' Scot also expands on the twelfth-century Salerno school treatise, *De adventu medici ad egrotum*. He suggests that doctors should consider not only the colour of the patient's urine and his pulse rate, but also his occupation and the hygiene of his surroundings. In effect, the doctor should obtain a broad clinical picture of the patient, and consider whether the illness might be caused by an affective problem or financial loss. Moreover, since the doctor should do anything which might relieve suffering, he may advise the patient to turn to magicians. Since magical practices are condemned by philosophers and the church, Scot insists that they must only be advised when the doctor knows that the patient cannot be helped by the use of conventional medicine, and it must be with the sole aim of finding a relief for the suffering of the patient.

Scot is not always consistent on these subjects. Despite his enthusiasm for astrology, he makes a clear distinction between the influence of the stars on bodily generation and corruption, and the freedom of the human soul to make independent judgements uninfluenced by the stars. Elsewhere, he invites parents to consult the stars before sending their children to study, in order to choose the most suitable discipline for them. He advised Frederick II to consult sages only when the moon was waxing, since a waning moon fills men and beasts with sadness and they lose the means of reasoning. Doctors, too, must consider the moon; for instance, when the moon is in the Ram, the head, which is the part of the body subject to that sign, must not be treated.

These and other instructions appear in the section 'De notitia regiminis astrologi', where Scot extols the astrologer's craft as worthy of praise and honours since, through this doctrine, he draws nearer to God; the astrologer's services are also often required by rulers, thus attracting handsome rewards. However, Scot also warns that the study of the stars requires lengthy study and freedom from the need to earn a living; astrology is not an appropriate science for a poor man lacking the necessary books. Scot's own adherence to astrology was not without contradictions. More than once he stresses the church's intolerance of those who try to use the hidden powers of the stars for their own ends, while referring elsewhere to the church's approval of astrology; in fact, in the 'Liber particularis', Scot praises Abu Ma'shar (Albumasar), al-Qabisi (Alcabitius), and al-Farghani (Alfraganus), learned astronomers and experts in a science considered to be wholly respectable. Although he leaves the question of whether the stars have a soul to the theologians, Scot does maintain that the planets experience feelings and joy. These stars are governed by angels, as officers of heaven, and other guardians watch over animate and inanimate substances.

Macrocosm and microcosm

In Scot's view, man is the noblest creature in the universe, superior to the angels and planets, and the human body is capable of all the virtues possessed by herbs, stones, flowers, and stars. In this completeness, the human intellect resembles the heavens, since it contains all things within itself. God being the cause of all things, Scot states that, as a servant is bound to his master, so every man is by his nature bound to honour the creator of the world. Man, however, is master of all earthly creatures, who must serve him as a vassal serves his lord.

In the 'Liber quattuor distinctionum', the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm appears to be one of a small scale replication in the tradition of the *Aratea* of Germanicus Julius Caesar. Scot drew his inspiration for these images from the Monte Cassino school, but also from Islamic sources, which provided many iconographical details—Medusa's bearded head, for instance, has been unequivocally identified with the demon Algol. Scot absorbed these Arabic figurative cycles into his work, which can be compared with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Aristophanes's *Thesmophoriazusae*, or Hyginus's *Poeticon astronomicon*, and thus radically altered the iconography of the planets; this new interpretation reappears in the Renaissance in the frescoes of the Cappellone degli Spagnoli in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence.

The 'Liber particularis' was designed to facilitate the study of astrology and make it more comprehensible. It contains the questions put to Scot by Frederick II on the structure of the earth, the location of hell, why sea water is salt, and volcanic activity. These questions are in the tradition of the *Salernitan Questions*, and there is an introduction in which Scot discusses with the emperor the misery of life on earth and the hope of divine redemption.

Science and religion

This scientific and theological view of the world is accompanied in Scot's 'Liber particularis' by historical notes on the ancient Roman rulers: Caesar was mild, but ruthless in his imposition of tributes; only Octavian (Augustus) was of angelic beauty. In the same work, following Ovid's *Fasti* and Macrobius's *Saturnalia*, Scot pays tribute to the 'astronomer kings' Romulus and Numa Pompilius, 'inventors of the calendar'. But he condemns the folly of the rulers of old in putting forward the theory that blood originates from a union of Jupiter, Venus, and Mercury. He is equally scathing about pagan cults and the false Christians who believe in them; they not only worship those gods as the Saracens do, but at all times consult diviners and sorcerers. All Scot's works, like the discussions he had with the emperor, are marked by this interweaving of religion and science and this is also seen in the *Liber physionomie*, where Scot urges Frederick II to encourage the study of science and to hold disputations at his court at which the emperor could hear the diverse opinions of scholars and wise men. The invitations issued were apparently accepted. In fact, the Latin translation (sometimes attributed to Scot) of Maimonides's *Guide to the Perplexed* is prefaced by a discussion of parables and an analysis of Maimonides's work, a discourse which combines the arguments of John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* and the exegesis of the *Guide to the Perplexed*, with the aim of emphasizing the need to read Deuteronomy. This introduction to the *Guide* recalls the *Malmad ha-Talmidim* ('A spur for students'), in which Jacob Anatoli, a Jewish philosopher from Provence who worked with Scot, collected together the exegetic debates between Frederick II and Michael Scot as they discussed various biblical texts. It is here that Scot, commenting on Hosea 14: 10, notes that man is like the fir tree, whose evergreen branches, lifted heavenwards, symbolize the vitality of all the sciences.

In analysing Maimonides's work, Scot and Anatoli found themselves in conflict with Frederick II, who supported the neoplatonic idea of the existence of matter before the creation of the world. Scot notes, however, that the problem of the *yle*, or primordial chaos, has been the subject of cavilling definitions by philosophers and that there is no simple solution to the question.

The whole of the *Liber introductorius* is strongly influenced by theological studies; Scot observes that a knowledge of nature and of living creatures is one of the paths to a knowledge of the Creator, and that it is through astronomy that the many secrets of God can be understood. Nature is controlled by God, who can alter its laws by miraculous interventions, defined as everything which is contrary to nature.

Scot's sources and his use of them

Influences on Scot can be traced to the commentary on the *Hexaëmeron* of Basil of Caesarea, as well as to Boethius, St Augustine, Isidore of Seville, Bede, Alcher de Clairvaux, Hugues de St Victor, Abelard, and William de Conches; references to Aristotle, Avicenna, and Averroes, however, are rare. The *Liber physionomie* shows the influence of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum secretorum*, of the second book of Rhazes's *Liber Almansor*, of Constantine the African's *De coitu*, and of the *Liber nativitatum* of Abubacer. The latter describes how the physical and intellectual characteristics of the unborn child are influenced by the position of the planets as well as by the quality of the seed and the humour of the parents. Reflecting this influence, the *Liber physionomie* begins with a detailed description of the phases of conception and the development of the embryo. Scot considers embryology and neonatology essential for an understanding of those human characteristics indicated by physiognomic features. This science, which Scot describes as the intelligent understanding of nature, by means of which the virtues and vices of all creatures may be known, is presented as being of extreme utility for the 'scientist-emperor' Frederick II, in helping him to know and judge the intentions of his associates. Thus a man with red hair may be judged as envious, spiteful, haughty, and malevolent; a pallid complexion indicates not only poor health but also a malicious and lustful character, inclined to infidelity and unlawfulness.

The eclectic tendencies which Scot displays in his writing identify him as a Christian philosopher who took all the opportunities offered by the developments in natural sciences in the twelfth century. In addition to the ideas propogulated in the Sibylline books and works of magic, he refers to the *Liber ymaginum*, the *Testament of Solomon*, the *De secretis angelorum*, and the *Liber lune*, with their blend of Hermetic, Arabic, and Hebrew traditions and ideas. For Scot, this combination of doctrines constitutes the knowledge of hidden things which raises man among the mighty and brings him, while still in the body, almost to the gate of paradise.

Minor works

Among Scot's works is a short commentary on the *Regulae urinarum* by Marius Salernitanus, leading to speculation that Scot belonged to the so-called Salerno medical school. In fact, Scot's leanings were quite different from those of that school; he did not use the medical anthology known as the *Articella*, which served as a manual in schools and universities, and he blended medical science and astrology, which the Salerno masters would never have accepted. Furthermore, he also compiled an *Ars alchemie* intended to rescue this science from the obscurity in which it had been deliberately shrouded by the philosophers of the time.

Afterlife in legend

Scot's fame as an astrologer, reinforced by the notoriety of his employer, was such that many prophecies of the coming of Antichrist were attributed to him; however, several have an anti-Ghibelline stamp, and are consequently unlikely to have been his. In 1228 the Pisan mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci presented Scot, who had asked for a copy of his *Liber abaci*, with a revised text and invited him to amend it; Cardinal Raniero Capocci, learning of this correspondence between the two scholars, included some of the questions put by Frederick II to his astrologer in an anti-Ghibelline prophecy, in an attempt to circulate propaganda which would discredit the emperor. Against such a background, it is not surprising that Michael Scot soon came to have a reputation as a magician. The Franciscan chronicler Salimbene de Adam, writing well before the end of the thirteenth century, recounts among the superstitions which he attributes to Frederick II the emperor's asking Scot how far his palace was from the heavens, and then, when Scot had made a calculation, having the palace hall lowered and asking Scot for a second estimate. When Michael had declared that either heaven had risen or the earth had become lower, Frederick knew that he was dealing with a true astrologer. Elsewhere in his *Cronica* Salimbene refers to Michael Scot as a soothsayer and observes that much of what he had foretold had indeed come to pass.

Dante was less impressed; and in Canto 20 of the *Inferno* he places Scot in the circle of hell reserved for sorcerers, with a derogatory allusion both to his meagre flanks and to his acquaintance with magical trickery. To Boccaccio, in his *Decameron* of the middle of the fourteenth century, Scot was simply a great master of necromancy; and he was clearly seen in the same light by those who identified him, in the fresco painted between 1366 and 1388 by Andrea Bonaiuti in the Cappellone degli Spagnoli of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, as the philosopher in Jewish dress who tears up the scriptures in front of St Dominic, while the saint reprimands a group of heretics who include Arius and Averroes. Benvenuto da Imola, writing in the 1370s, tells how Scot was able to foretell the manner of his own death, from the falling of a stone on his head, and therefore always wore a metal skullcap, only to be killed when he took it off on entering a church, whereupon a stone duly fell on him. Benvenuto was, however, sceptical about many of the magical feats attributed to Scot, and in this he was followed by Scot's later compatriot Thomas Dempster. Although Dempster in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Scotorum* (1627) describes Scot as dying in 1291 in extreme old age, he also attributes to him an admirable knowledge of medicine (*physicarum rerum*). Dempster also reports that innumerable old wives' tales were still circulating among the populace in which Scot featured as a magician. Sir Walter Scott, in the second

canto of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), both in his verses and in his notes accompanying them, presents a wide-ranging sample of such stories, for instance that with his magic wand Scot could ring the bells of Notre Dame in Paris from his grotto in Salamanca. In more recent times the works of C. H. Haskins and Lynn Thorndike, in particular, while placing appropriate stress on Scot's position as Frederick II's astrologer, have also brought out the value of his work as a translator and philosopher.

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Wealth at Death

held four ecclesiastical grants: Manselli, 'La corte di Federico II'