

Annuario di storia della metafisica  
Annuaire d'histoire de la métaphysique  
Jahrbuch für die Geschichte der Metaphysik  
Yearbook of the History of Metaphysics

# Quaestio

Stars, Kingdoms, Beliefs,  
and Masses. Political  
Astrology in the  
Mediterranean Area  
from Middle Ages  
to the Renaissance

Le stelle, i regni,  
le credenze e le masse.  
L'astrologia politica  
nel Mediterraneo  
tra Medioevo  
e Rinascimento

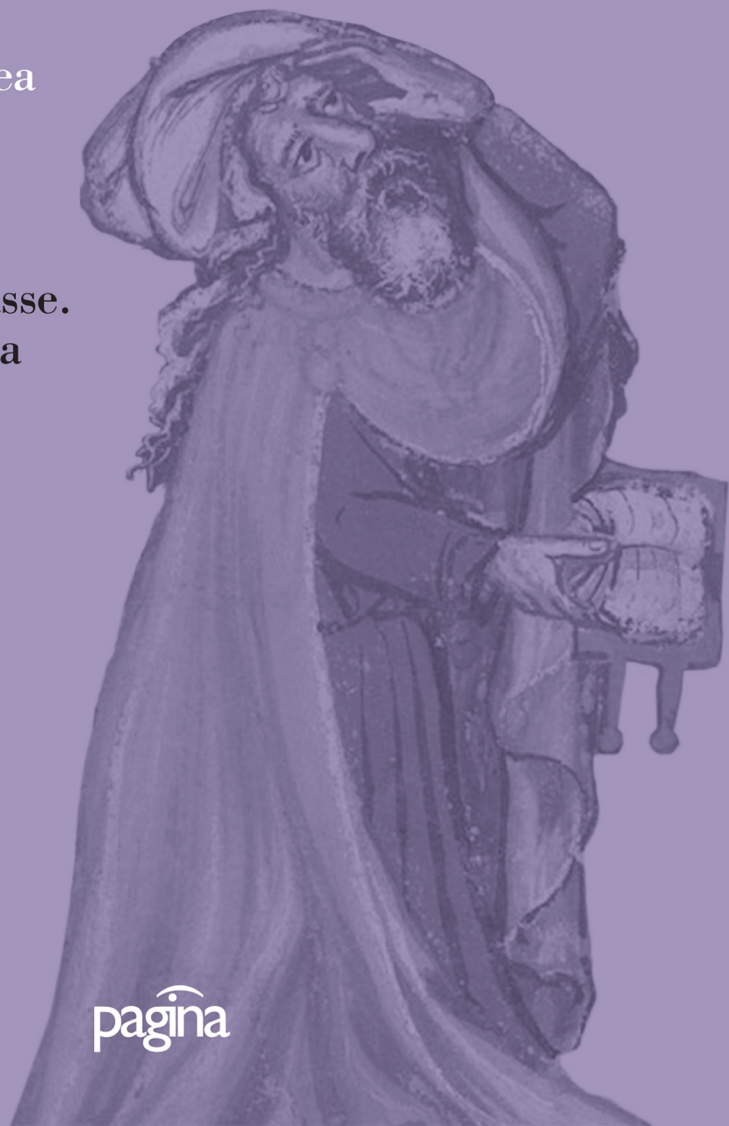
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Marienza Benedetto  
Pasquale Arfé  
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2019

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# Quaestio 19/2019

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Alessandra Beccarisi

## The Geomantic Technique and its Applications

In 2008 I began to study and edit a little-known text attributed to a well-known author: the *Geomantia* attributed to William of Moerbeke. From this pioneering investigation, three Italian Universities developed a research project that lasted three years within the framework of the project FIRB (Futuro in Ricerca), ‘Foreseeing Events and Dominating Nature: Models of Operative Rationality and the Circulation of Knowledge in the Arab, Hebrew and Latin Middle Ages’, funded by the Italian University and Research Ministry (MIUR, principal investigator Marienza Benedetto)<sup>1</sup>.

This project took into consideration three geomantic texts, the critical editions of which represent a *desideratum* within various fields of academic research. These are, chronologically: the *Ars geomantiae* by Hugh of Santalla, the first authoritative example of geomantic literature in the Latin West, translated into Latin from Arabic<sup>2</sup>; the *Estimaverunt Indi*, which is also a translation into Latin from Arabic of a lost treatise<sup>3</sup>, and finally the *Geomantia* attributed to William of Moerbeke, papal penitentiary and famous translator of Aristotle’s work<sup>4</sup>. Thanks to the work of Elisa Rubino, the critical edition of the *Geomantia* will be published in the next year.

The present article aims at providing a general overview of the geomantic technique and its applications. In order to achieve this aim, I will first offer some preliminary considerations on the concept of natural divination.

<sup>1</sup> This article, together with my research on geomancy conducted since 2011, was possible thanks to two scholarships from the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, which allowed me to work with Prof. Thomas Ricklin (2011) and Prof. Marc-Aeilko Aris (2019). I would also like to thank Eleonora Andriani and Katie Reid for the linguistic revision of the article and for the English translations of passages from the geomantic treatises.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. ARFÉ 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. ZAVATTERO 2017a and ZAVATTERO 2017b.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. CHARMASSON 1980, pp. 157-167; VANHAMEL 1989, pp. 376-383; BECCARISI 2011 and 2017; RUBINO 2017a and 2017b.

## 1. Geomancy: Preliminary Considerations

Generally speaking, divination is the practice of determining the hidden significance or cause of events, sometimes foretelling the future, by various natural, psychological, and other techniques. This practice is universally concerned with practical problems, private or public, and seeks information upon which decisions should be made.

During the Middle Ages, one of the terms used to designate this complex of techniques is ‘mantic’, the etymology of which is drawn from the Greek ‘manteia’, namely ‘divinatio’.

The most popular mantic practices employ the four elements: earth, water, air and fire. Unlike natural philosophy, which considers the elements as a subject of theoretical investigation, these practices consider the elements merely in terms of their prognostic aspects. Mantic disciplines are perceived as instruments capable of revealing future outcomes and as effective devices to choose the right course of action. The four elemental modes of divination are: pyromancy (by fire), hydromancy (by water), aeromancy (by air) and geomancy (by earth).

The seventh-century author Isidore of Seville deals with magic and divination in book VIII, chapter IX of his *Etymologiae*. During the Middle Ages, this text played a crucial role in the debate on magic and divinatory arts. Following Cicero, Isidore uses the term ‘*divinare*’ for the mode of cognition that partakes in the knowledge of God, which elevates it above the limits of natural knowledge<sup>5</sup>.

In the twelfth century, however, the reception of Arabic texts on philosophy and science marks a turning point in the epistemological consideration of the predictive arts. The great translation movement of natural philosophy texts (of Greek or directly Arabic origin) from Arabic into Hebrew and Latin, included a corpus of astrological, hermetic, alchemic writings, as well as those on magic and divination. This not only gave rise, from the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, to a new scientific library in the West; it also introduced the idea – still unknown in the Latin world – that nature was based on a rational system and as such, was predictable and open to manipulation through theoretical competencies and operative techniques<sup>6</sup>.

The new disciplines from the Arabic world were systematized and categorized in the Christian Latin West through the classical division of the seven liberal arts<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> ISIDORUS HISPALENSIS, *Etymologiae* VIII, 9, 11-31, ed. WINTERS; FIDORA 2013, p. 519.

<sup>6</sup> On this topic, see THORNDIKE 1923, pp. 548-592; HASKINS 1960; GARIN 1976; FEDERICI VESCOVINI 1979; CAROTI 1983; GREGORY 1992; GRANT 1994; BURNETT 1996; CRISCIANI / PEREIRA 1996; TRAVAGLIA 1999; WEILL-PAROT 1999; RAPISARDA 2006; BENEDETTO 2011; SANNINO 2011; STURLESE (Hrsg.) 2011; FIDORA 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. PARAVICINI BAGLIANI (ed.) 2016; in particular see the contributions of JACQUART 2016 and of JUSTE 2016.

As Fidora illustrates, the new account of the epistemological status of the mantic disciplines “can be found in texts known as introductions to philosophy”<sup>8</sup>. There the mantic disciplines are no longer considered expressions of a supernatural knowledge, but rather as kinds of science. Albert the Great defines them as belonging to the ‘*scientia coniecturalis*’, of which medicine and geomancy also seem to be a part<sup>9</sup>.

‘*Scientia coniecturalis*’ means that these kinds of practices do not deal with the ‘*causae*’, but rather with the ‘*signa*’ that the ‘*sapiens*’ should interpret correctly in order to provide appropriate solutions to the questions of the consultant. This shows a clear parallel with medicine: the physician should interpret the symptoms correctly in order to recognize a disease and start medications<sup>10</sup>.

As for the theoretical background, natural divination implies a link between the sublunary world and the celestial bodies, namely stars, planets, constellations, and Zodiac. The celestial bodies produce certain effects on the sublunary world, depending on their configurations.

Mantic disciplines derive their validity from this epistemological framework and suggest that celestial bodies affect human beings’ fates and personalities. Indeed, the celestial bodies affect sublunary life and existence to some extent, which includes the corporeal dimension (such as the human body) and the incorporeal faculties such as the individual’s intellect and will. Therefore, the influence of the celestial bodies goes far beyond the natural phenomena and involves the choices and actions of the individual<sup>11</sup>.

The practice of geomancy provides an extremely interesting case study in this respect: developed essentially by the Arabs (although it also appears in Antiquity), geomancy is a technique that instructs on how to form figures from dots, which are traced on earth or sand (but also on paper) and to use these to foretell future events<sup>12</sup>. The geomancer, who, it was claimed, was guided in his work by the natural influence of the stars, was thus able to answer the questions of the consultant on specific matters. For instance, Hugo Sanctelliensis, the first

<sup>8</sup> FIDORA 2013, p. 520.

<sup>9</sup> ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *De quinque universalibus*, tr. 1, cap. 7, ed. SANTOS NOYA, p. 15, ll. 65-70: “Et in realibus scientiis aliter est in probabilibus, et aliter in necessariis et stantibus, et aliter est in coniecturalibus, quae sunt scientiae divinationum, sicut in secunda parte astronomiae et in geomantia”.

<sup>10</sup> ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Super II librum Sententiarum* d. 7, a. 5, ed. BORGNET, p. 149: “Causa est ad cuius esse sequitur aliud: et sic bellorum et voluntariorum sunt astra signa, non causae, scilicet in quantum voluntates hominum trahuntur dispositione corporum ad mobilitates et affectiones quasdam; sicut etiam dicit medicus, quod bona complexio significat bonos mores, et mala malos, et sicut dicit melancholicos esse invidios et perfidos, fidem non retinentes, et huiusmodi. Et sunt signa quae frequenter fallunt”.

<sup>11</sup> For a general overview of this topic, see PORRO 2014 and BECCARISI / RETUCCI (a cura di) 2017, in particular the Introduction, pp. 7-14.

<sup>12</sup> On the geomantic technique see CHARMASSON 1980; for a general overview of the *status quaestionis* see PALAZZO 2017.

scholar to bring geomancy into Latin from Arabic, underlines the purely natural process of geomancy<sup>13</sup>.

A witness to the geomantic practice, its principles and implications is the historian Ibn Khaldūn, who dedicates an entire chapter of his *Muqaddimah* to geomancy:

“The sand diviners have thus invented a discipline that runs parallel to astrology and the system of astrological judgments. However, the astrological judgments are based upon natural indications, as Ptolemy assumes. The indications of sand writing, on the other hand, are conventional. [...] When the sand diviners came, they discontinued use of the stars and the positions of the spheres, because they found it difficult to establish the altitude of the stars by means of instrument and to find the adjusted position of the stars by means of calculation. Therefore they invented their combination of figures”<sup>14</sup>.

Ibn Khaldūn’s passage documents two aspects of geomancy that frequently return in the geomantic treatises of the Latin tradition, namely:

- 1) The alleged dependence on astrology, from which terminology and, in part, technique, are borrowed.
- 2) The simplification of the technique, which does not require complicated calculations or elaborate instruments.

We will look at these two aspects in more detail in the following paragraph.

## 2. The Geomantic Technique and its Application

The term geomancy comes from early mediaeval Latin ‘geomantia’, which was used in Spain as early as the sixth/twelfth century to translate ‘ilm al-raml’ (literally, the science of sand), the most common Arabic name for this type of divination<sup>15</sup>.

Geomancy can be defined as a practice of obtaining insight into the present or future of the inquirer. It seems to anticipate the modern idea of an unconscious part of the mind working intelligently behind the scenes and giving directions and warnings that the conscious mind is not always able to receive or to interpret. This aspect of geomancy was well known in the Islamic world, where geomancy was classified as a mathematical science<sup>16</sup>. Ibn Khaldūn insists on

<sup>13</sup> Cf. BURNETT 2017, p. 165.

<sup>14</sup> IBN KHALDŪN, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, ed. ROSENTHAL, pp. 227-228.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. SAVAGE-SMITH 2019, p. 98.

<sup>16</sup> According to Melvin-Koushki, Razi classifies geomancy as a mathematical science for the first time in the Western tradition as a whole, together with astrology; cf. also MELVIN-KOUSHKI 2017, p. 359.

the ability of the ‘sand diviners’ to investigate the unconscious, or to understand psychological phenomena through the observation of conventional figures, such as geomantic figures<sup>17</sup>.

Let us focus now on how geomantic practice works. The divinatory practice is accomplished by forming and interpreting a design consisting of sixteen positions (*domus*), each of which is occupied by a geomantic figure (Fig. 1).

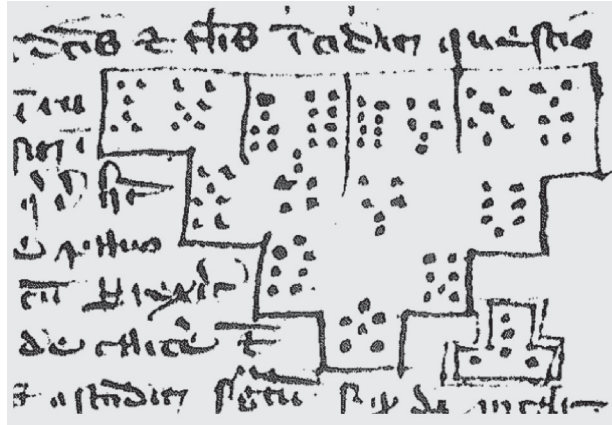


Fig. 1. William of Moerbeke, *Geomantia*, Erfurt, Wiss. Bibl. Ampl. Qu. 373 (XIV s.), ff. 39r - 118r, f. 37ra

A question is ‘proposed’ by the geomancer himself or by his client or inquirer. Then the geomancer jots down (‘projects’) four times four rows of a random number of dots (Fig. 2).

Several geomantic treatises point out that this step should be performed from right to left, following the celestial movement, or according to the custom of the Arabs, the Egyptians, and the Jewish people, as William of Moerbeke claims<sup>18</sup>.

The geomancer must not count the dots while making them. This is an im-

<sup>17</sup> IBN KHALDŪN, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, ed. ROSENTHAL, p. 228: “Ptolomy discussed only nativities and conjunctions which, in his opinion, come within the influence of the stars and the positions of the spheres upon the world of elements. Subsequent astrologers, however, discussed questions (interrogationes), in that they attempted to discover the innermost thoughts (the unconscious Dama’ir) by attributing them to various houses of the firmament and drawing conclusions concerning them, according to the judgments governing each particular astral house”; cf. GARIN 1976, pp. 39-40; on this topic see also BECCARISI 2017, p. 372.

<sup>18</sup> In this article I will not address the question of the authorship of the *Geomantia* attributed to William of Moerbeke. In this regard, I refer to the work of Elisa Rubino and my article *Qualche considerazione sulla Geomantia attribuita a Guglielmo di Moerbeke*, in *Noctua* (forthcoming). I will cite the text from the manuscript Kassel, Landesbibliothek, Astron. Qu. 16, f. 43r [= K] and from the critical edition GUILLELMUS DE MOERBECA *Geomantia*, ed. RUBINO (forthcoming): GUILLELMUS DE MOERBECA *Geomantia*, I.1, ed. RUBINO, K f. 1ra-b: “quomodo questio est incipienda, hoc est ad manum dextram incipiendo et ducendo versus sinistram, secundum motum planetarum autem veniendo more Arabum atque Hebreorum sive Egyptiorum”.

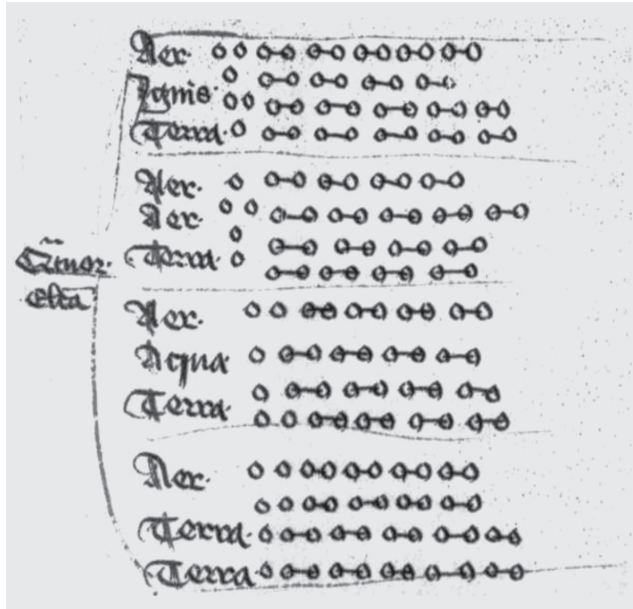


Fig. 2. Bartholomeus de Parma, *Breviloquium geomantie*, München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 398, f. 2v

portant point, as the geomantic figures emerge (rise) not as product of the geomancer's or the consulter's will, but as a representation (*signum*) of the astral and celestial configuration at the moment of consultation, as stated by the anonymous treatise *Estimaverunt Indi*:

“Et scias quod non formantur figure secundum quod intendit querens, nec secundum questionem eius, et non formantur in eis, nisi cum eo cuius portendit potentia esse, siue querat de eo querens aut non querat, sic formantur, sicut formantur in uisione. Et propter illud errat in eis qui credit quod intentio egrediatur in eis secundum omnem habitudinem in eis voluntarie, cum res non est ita. Et non formatur intentio in eis nisi quando est in eis quod est possibile esse, et cuius casus est necessarius. Nam intentio illa est que formatur in eis. Et quando intendit homo rem cuius esse non pertransit potentiam, non formatur in eis. Et non formatur in eis nisi quod erit, sicut premisimus”<sup>19</sup>.

Geomantic figures are not formed on the basis of what the consultant wants, nor on the basis of his question. Anyone who believes that his intention is voluntarily expressed in the figures is mistaken. The ‘intentio figure’ gives rise to the figures only when there is the power to do so within them. Then, the chance (*casus*) appears involuntarily and the figures are formed as in a vision.

<sup>19</sup> *Estimaverunt Indi*, ms. Firenze, Biblioteca Nazionale, Magliab. XX.9, 1ra.

Depending on whether their total in a row is an odd or an even number, one or two dots respectively are considered to be the result of that row. The results of each row thus obtained become the constituent parts of four original 'figures' called '*matres*', each of which is derived from one of the four sets of four rows. From these four figures the remaining twelve positions in the tableau are produced according to the same procedure. The second, third, and fourth '*matres*' are formed accordingly from the second, third and fourth sets of rows of random dots. Any one of sixteen different figures, each consisting of four lines of one or more. The four geomantic figures so formed are called the four Mothers and are the basis for the whole geomantic chart. From here on the geomantic figures and calculations are generated solely out of these four figures. One or two dots may thus result for each '*mater*'. Next, the figures of four '*filiae*' are extracted from the '*matres*': the first, second, third, and bottom lines of the first *mater* become the top lines of the first, second, third, and fourth '*filia*' respectively. The four lines of the second '*mater*' are similarly used to form the second lines of the first, second, third and fourth '*filia*'; then the third and fourth '*matres*' are dissected in the same manner to become the third and bottom lines respectively of the four '*filiae*'. '*Matres*' and '*filiae*' are placed in a line of eight contiguous compartments or '*houses*' that are numbered from right to left, the '*matres*' occupying houses I to IV in the order of their formation, and the '*filiae*' occupying houses V to VIII, also in the order of their formation. The first and second, and the third and fourth '*matres*', as well as the first and second, and the third and fourth '*filiae*' are now paired to form four further figures, called '*nepotes*', which are entered in four compartments or houses placed below, so that a ninth house is formed under the first and second, a tenth house under the third and fourth, an eleventh house under the fifth and sixth, and a twelfth house under the seventh and eighth houses. The pairing follows the same method as that used in the extraction of the '*matres*' from the original rows of random dots: the first, second, third and bottom lines respectively of the two '*matres*' or two '*filiae*' to be paired are added up; if the sum of their first lines is, for instance, an odd number, then the first line of the resulting '*nepos*'-figure consists of one dot; if the sum of the second lines of the two figures to be paired is an even number, then the second line of the resulting '*nepos*'-figure consists of two dots; and so likewise for the third and fourth lines of the '*nepotes*'. The twelve compartments or houses thus formed correspond to the twelve houses of astrology. Next, the figures found in the ninth and tenth, and those in the eleventh and twelfth houses, are paired by the same method as that by which they (the '*nepotes*') had themselves been produced. The resulting two figures, called '*testes*', are entered in two compartments under their parent figures. They produce in turn (by the same method) a last figure, called '*judex*', which is entered at the bottom of the scheme, below the *testes*. The *judex*-figure

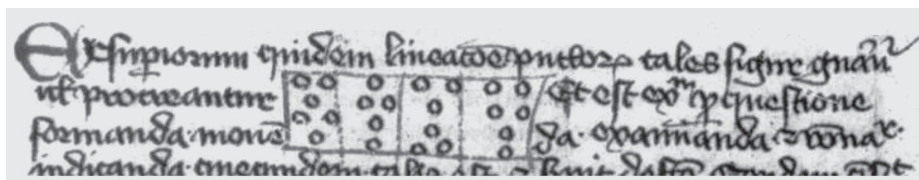


Fig. 3. Bartholomeus de Parma, *Breviloquium geomantie*, München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 398, f. 2v: the four *matres*.

is the principal element in the interpretation of a geomantic scheme. It is deemed to contain the answer to the question and may reveal it when paired with the figure of the first ‘mater’ (Fig. 3).

It is worth noticing that the answer to the question depends entirely on the composition of the sixteen lines of random dots which the geomancer produces at the beginning of the operation. Each of them has a Latin name, its special significance, and its zodiacal, planetary, and elementary correspondences<sup>20</sup>.

There are differences between the various treatises of geomancy in the name schemes of the various figures. In this contribution, I follow Moerbeke’s name scheme<sup>21</sup>:

*Barbatus* sive *Caput altum* vel *Magnus Senex* vel *Ridens* aut *Leta* sive *Letitia*  
*Diminutus* sive *Tristis*, *Tristitia* aut *Transversus*  
*Candidus* sive *Albus*  
*Rubeus* sive *Ruffus*  
*Mundus facie* aut *Maxilla munda* sive *Puer*.  
*Puella*, *Flavus* sive *Imberbis*  
*Limen superius* sive *Caput*  
*Limen inferius* sive *Cauda*  
*Comprehensum intus* sive *Acquisitio*  
*Comprehensum extra* sive *Amissio*  
*Fortuna maior*, *Homen maius* sive *Tutela intrans* aut *Auxilium intus* vel *Honor intus*  
*Fortuna minor* sive *Homen minus*, *Honor apparens* vel *Honor extra*  
*Via* sive *Iter*  
*Congregatio* sive *Populus* vel *Collectio*  
*Feretrum* vel *Coadunatio* vel *Coniunctio*  
*Constrictus* sive *Carcer*

As example for description of a figure, I take *Barbatus*:

“*Barbatus* sive *Caput altum* vel *Magnus Senex* vel *Ridens* aut *Leta* sive *Letitia*. Et dicitur *Barbatus Senex* vel *Magnus* propter nobilitatem et excellentiam quam habet respectu

<sup>20</sup> Cf. CHARMASSON 1980, pp. 38-48.

<sup>21</sup> GUILLELMUS DE MOERBECA, *Geomantia*, I 2, ed. RUBINO, K ff. 2ra-3ra.



aliarum figurarum, quia figura est Iovis. Et significat etatis maturitatem et complementum stature et sapientiam, quia ad senem barbaturam convenienter hec convenit. *Ridens* dicitur a proprietate, quia figura benivola et hylaris est et signum Tauri et planete benivoli, cito convertibilis ad risum et solatium. *Letitia* dicitur, quia significat gaudium et letitiam habitam, sed non habituram. Bene moratur in omnibus domibus nisi in 6<sup>a</sup>, 8<sup>a</sup> et 12<sup>a</sup>. In Tauro continetur sub dominio Iovis. Et est aerea, calida et humida, sanguinea, masculina et diurna. Et est in ea virtus significans annos. Colorem vult flavum”<sup>22</sup>.

While the geomantic figures are specific to the geomantic practice, the houses derives from traditional astrology and their basic meaning is as follows:

*Domus I*: the questioner

*Domus II*: money, movable assets

*Domus III*: siblings, neighbours, short trips

*Domus IV*: father, home, real estate

*Domus V*: children, joy, gambling

*Domus VI*: disease, servants, small animals

*Domus VII*: marriage, partner, open enemies

*Domus VIII*: death, inheritance

*Domus IX*: long journeys, spirituality

*Domus X*: career, government, reputation

*Domus XI*: friends

*Domus XII*: secret enemies, detention

Bartholomeus of Parma, author of one of the most elaborate treatises on geomancy written in the thirteenth century, describes geomancy as a “filia artis astrologiae”<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, the *Geomantia* attributed to William of Moerbeke claims that geomancy was invented because of the high degree of complexity of the ‘ars astronomiae’. Indeed, an astrological judgement cannot be performed at any time and in any place, as it requires the exact calculation of the position of the planets, especially for the moment in which the divination takes place:

“In prohemio isto dicam que fuit causa intentionis huius scientie et quare fuit inventa vel condita. Ratio est hec ab auctoribus et philosophis huius scientie inventoribus tradita, quia ars astronomie nimis difficilis erat et prolixa ad iudicandum atque tarda. Et iterum quia non in omnibus locis neque temporibus licebat illam formare, tum propter temporis brevitatem, tum propter incognitum sive intangibilem stellarum cursum vel planetarum motum, ut in quinta huius libri particula plenius est traditum”<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> GUILLELMUS DE MOERBECA, *Geomantia*, I 2, ed. RUBINO, K. f. 2ra.

<sup>23</sup> BARTHOLOMAEUS DE PARMA, *Breviloquium geomantie*, München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 398, f. 1r: “Volens artem geomantie practicam quidam seu filiam artis astrologie connumerare inter septem artes liberales bene addiscere prescire debet quando ipsam geomantiam per omnia et in omnibus sequitur manifestissime a stellis, licet per alium modum et verba sine tot libris ac instrumentis”.

<sup>24</sup> GUILLELMUS DE MOERBECA, *Geomantia*, ed. RUBINO, K, f. 1ra.

*In this prohemium, I will state the cause of this science's purpose, and why it was invented and cultivated. The reason is this: it was transmitted by the authors and the philosophers of this science and by its inventors, as astrology is too hard and prolix and slow. And also because it cannot be performed in any place or at any time, due both to the shortness of time and the unknown or intangible course of the stars and motion of the planets, as is handed down in the fifth part of this book with fuller details.*

The main idea is that the geomantic figures are signs on earth of a precise astral configuration, because they are formed by the influence of the celestial bodies on the sublunary world. The geomancer is thus a mere instrument of celestial power, as explained in the *Geomantia* attributed to Moerbeke. At the beginning of the fifth part (*De radice et virtute huius scientie*), the author describes the three movements on which the validity of geomancy is based: the first movement comes from the rational soul, the second movement from the celestial bodies, while the third movement comes from the lower bodies. An example clarifies this network of causality: just as it is not the hammer that works the raw material and gives it shape, but rather the activity of the craftsman ('*artifex*'), so it is not the hand that, by calculating the dots in the sand, produces the hidden meaning of the figures ('*intentiones figurarum*'), but rather the influence of the celestial bodies, which the soul understands.

*“Et nota quod ista scientia habet tres motus. Primus est ab ipsa anima rationali, secundus est a corporibus supracelestibus, tertius ab inferioribus. Unde cum anima sit ignee nature et ex angelica natura causata sine forma sine materia intellectus et sapientie ex subtilitate creationis sue et nobilitate ascendit ad superiora, cui celestia influunt sapientiam et intellectum, ut mediante inferiore motu per vestigium arene comprehendat et det in intelligere corpori, per dispositionem impressionis quod fuit occultum apparet. Unde, sicut malleus in malleando non dat forma materie, sed industria artificis, nec utique manus calculando in arena dat cognitionem in omnibus intentionibus, sed influentia virtutis corporum celestium, quam ex igneitate comprehendit anima”<sup>25</sup>.*

*So, as the hammer by its beating does not give shape to the matter, but rather the activity of the craftsman (does), so it is not the hand that counts (the dots) in the sand that informs the knowledge in all the intentions, but the influence of the virtues of the celestial bodies, that the soul comprehends by virtue of their common fiery quality.*

In my opinion, this passage is very important, for understanding the epistemological framework in which some geomancy treaties are intended to fit. In particular, the treatise attributed to Moerbeke makes explicit reference to a sort of movement of the rational soul towards the supernatural world, which is the guarantee of the truthfulness of the process. This is an important detail: accord-

<sup>25</sup> GUILLELMUS DE MOERBECA, *Geomantia*, 5.2, ed. RUBINO, K, f. 30va.

ing to Ibn Khaldūn, “supernatural cannot be perceived by any craft (technique) at all. The only people who can acquire knowledge of the supernatural are those distinguished human beings who are fitted by nature to return from the world of sensual perception to the world of the spirit”. If he who calls himself a geomancer is “one of those distinguished beings, and if his study of dots is intended to occupy his senses in order that his soul may return momentarily to the world of spiritualia”, then “they may attain intuitive supernatural revelation”. On the contrary “those who restrict themselves to techniques that achieve supernatural by means of sagacity and conjecturing, continue to wandering in the realm of guesswork”<sup>26</sup>.

According to the *Geomantia*, it is not just mastering a technique that makes it possible to reveal what is hidden (*occultum*). Inspiration is needed, thanks to intellect (*intellectus*) and wisdom (*sapientia*) influenced by celestial bodies (*celestia*). That is why, compared to the interpretative framework offered by Alexander Fidora and Charles Burnett, the geomantic texts considered seem, in a certain sense, ill-fitting. If it is true, in fact, that the mantic arts are included in the manuals for students among the ‘mechanical’ arts, it is nevertheless evident that for the three texts considered, geomancy is a science that derives its validity directly from God. It is therefore a *divinatio* in the proper sense of the word: it is a knowledge deriving from God. The reference in the treatise *Geomantia* to the ‘virtus aestimativa’ as the human faculty responsible for the geomantic process cannot be accidental:

“Potest insuper pluribus aliis fieri modis, sicut in tabula gypsea et cerea et cum penna in carta et in lapidibus et lateribus et generaliter cum omni eo in quo virtus estimativa potest considerare paritatem et imparitatem punctorum et figurarum”<sup>27</sup>.

According to Avicennian theory, ‘virtus estimativa’ is one of the five internal senses, the object of which is the so-called ‘intentiones’, that is, the non-sensitive elements present in things, such as the good, the bad, the pleasant or the unpleasant<sup>28</sup>.

In his article *The Avicenna aestimatio (al-wahm) in Fakhr Al-Din Al-razi’s Theory of Talismanic Action at distance*, Michael Noble underlines the link between

<sup>26</sup> IBN KHALDŪN, *The Muqaddimah*, ed. ROSENTHAL, pp. 230-234. I would like to refer on this point to another translation of IBN KHALDŪN, *Discours sur l’histoire universelle, traduction nouvelle*, éd. MONTEIL, I, pp. 229-230: “En vérité, tout le monde devrait le savoir, aucune technique ne peut donner la connaissance des choses cachées. Le seuls qui puissent y prétendre sont ceux qui sont, par nature, doués pour passer du monde de la perception sensorielle au monde de l’esprit (...). [...] Tout qui s’adonne à la geomancie, ou à des pratiques semblables, doit être doué. Il ne doit scruter les point, les os, etc., que pour occuper ses sens et laisser son âme retourner, pour un temps, aux choses spirituelles”.

<sup>27</sup> GUILLELMUS DE MOERBECA, *Geomantia*, I.1, ed. RUBINO, K f. 1va.

<sup>28</sup> See BLACK 2000 and HASSE 2000.

the *virtus aestimava* and prophetic gift. He claims that “since *aestimatio* was the internal sense that mediated between the material and the immaterial, it was crucial to Avicenna’s account of both prophetic and non-prophetic veridical dreams and visions: for these he held to be the cognitive products of a noetic transmission from celestial to human souls. Thus did Avicenna explain the phenomena of prophetic thaumaturgy and magic (*sihr*)”<sup>29</sup>.

By studying these figures, the geomancer is able to reconstruct the hidden message, written by the stars on the sand or on the earth. To those who can read it, this message (‘*intentio figurae*’) reveals what is hidden in the soul of the consultant, his deepest fears and desires. The theme that we could refer to as the ‘investigation of the unconscious mind’ is exhibited in the aforementioned treatises on geomancy: the *Estimaverunt Indi* (which appears to be the principal source for this issue), the *Summa geomantiae* of Bartholomew of Parma and the *Geomancy* attributed to William of Moerbeke<sup>30</sup>.

According to Bartholomaeus de Parma and William of Moerbeke:

“*Questio occultata in anima apparere incipit et reviviscit sicut fetus aut natus in utero matris de obscuritate exit ad lucem, spirat et apparet*”<sup>31</sup>.

*The occult question begins to appear in the soul and is restored to life just like a fetus or a newborn in the womb of its mother rises from the obscurity and comes to light and breath and appears.*

The work of the geomancer is a kind of maieutics, which bring to life and reveals what is already present in the mind of the consultant. Material supports such as dots, earth, sand or paper are simply, *per se*, bits of wood, bones or traces on the sand or signs on a piece of paper. However, within a specific framework, they acquire specific meanings and become a manifestation of the divine or of rational structure of the cosmos. The man (the practitioner) is the catalyst of this process. He is not only responsible for decoding the message, but in a way also for bringing it into the light<sup>32</sup>. This ties in with the distinction made by Ibn Khaldūn between ‘intuition’ (for the authentic geomancer) and ‘sagacity’ (for the mere technicians).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. NOBLE 2017, pp. 29-30.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. ZAVATTERO 2017a, pp. 75-76.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. ZAVATTERO 2017b, p. 77. On this topic cf. also BECCARISI (forthcoming).

<sup>32</sup> According to Elisa Rubino, geomancy can be considered an experimental science that provides times, methods and appropriate practices for the response to be reliable, just as in a laboratory. Therefore, it would not be a matter of prophecy; it would not be a special gift reserved for the chosen few. Instead it would be a scientific procedure that could be replicated if certain conditions were respected. In light of the tradition on which Latin geomancy evidently depends – that is, Arab culture and texts – geomancy can or even *must be* considered a prophetic art. Ibn Khaldūn, for example, considered the geomancer to be inspired, so that the lines of dots could be a way of achieving higher knowledge. See RUBINO 2018, pp. 89, 93.

### 3. Geomancy: Fields of Application

Let us now consider the application of geomancy.

The authors of geomantic treatises are mostly translators of philosophical, medical, and astrological works, while the readers often include clerics. This holds true for Michael, Archbishop of Tarragona, to whom Hugh of Santalla dedicates his work<sup>33</sup>, and for Theodosius of Flisco, the elected Archbishop of Reggio to whom Bartholomew of Parma offers his *Summa geomantiae*<sup>34</sup>. It is for the Norman Lord Peter de Preaux that Gautier le Breton translates the *Geomancy* attributed to William of Moerbeke into French<sup>35</sup>. As stated in some of the oldest catalogues, the owners of geomantic manuscripts during the Middle Ages are mostly Princes, clerics and intellectuals. However, it wasn't about mere curiosity; the text attributed to William of Moerbeke in the first *particula* points out possible types of target users, whose age, gender and degree of education should be taken into account by the geomancer:

“Et quis homo sit querens, utrum potestas, papa vel episcopus, rex aut imperator, vel cuius generis aut cuius artis aut cuius secte vel fidei, vel cuius scientie, lingue vel etatis vel sexus [...]”<sup>36</sup>.

*And which (kind of) man would be the querent, whether he will be a ruler/magistrate, a pope, or an emperor, and of which type or belonging to which art or guild or degree of literacy, or having a certain age or gender.*

Hence, the treatise explicitly characterizes a certain kind of client, consisting primarily of popes, archbishops and emperor. They belong to the leading class of the time and they seem to be the major recipients of these geomantic treatises. Therefore, it seems clear that geomantic treatises are intended to be categorised as tools for ‘decision-making’ or ‘political advertisement’.

This leads us to ask: which kind of help could geomancy or the geomantic response provide to the political sphere?

A lot has been written about the role of astrology within the political sphere<sup>37</sup>. Astrology claims that the celestial bodies exert an influence on the sublunary world, on the human bodies and, in a sense, on souls. Hence, one may foresee events simply by observing the regular course of the stars and the planets. The

<sup>33</sup> Cf. BURNETT 2017, p. 167.

<sup>34</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 134, ff. 1-128 and Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, 552, ff. 1-205. Cf. NARDUCCI 1884, p. 22; NARDI 1964.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. CHARMASSON 1980, 166.

<sup>36</sup> GUILLEMUS DE MOERBECA, *Geomantia*, 1.1, ed. RUBINO, K f. 1vb.

<sup>37</sup> See the lecture of LUDWIG 2014; cf. DEIMANN / JUSTE (eds) 2015, especially DYKES 2015 and BOUDET 2015; ANDRIANI 2018.

difficulty lies in decrypting the celestial data correctly: the astrological practices were relatively complex and therefore extremely specialised.

The geomantic approach simplifies the method, as it avoids the exact calculation (temporal and spatial) of the celestial bodies. Indeed, in the case of the geomantic art the coded messages (the ‘signa’) are not celestial, but they consist of the figures traced by the geomancer on the earth or on paper under the influence of the celestial bodies. In short, geomancy offers the same results as astrology, but with less effort.

By the thirteenth century, the treatises on geomancy already had reached a degree of sophistication that went beyond the description of geomantic techniques. Indeed, they often provide a broad range of standard cases of application, organized into twelve sections that correspond to the twelve astrological houses.

The list includes several different topics, designed to allow geomancers to reply to questions related to daily life. Among these issues are whether a newborn will be a boy or a girl, and whether someone will be appointed to the position of Archbishop.

I believe it is possible to distinguish at least three spheres of application:

The first sphere of application concerns the collection and checking of information within the ‘political sphere’; if knowledge is power than having reliable information is absolutely crucial. Knowing in advance whether the summer will be rainy or dry may help to choose the most appropriate course of action within the sphere of rural production. Knowing in advance the outcome of a papal or archbishopric election may help to build fruitful alliances or quickly change a strategy.

See for instance the questions from the *X Domus*:

[4.5.10.1] De fertilitate et sterilitate.

[4.5.10.2] De arte scilicet mechanica si sit utilis.

[4.5.10.3] De gratia domini sui habenda vel aliud de eodem.

[4.5.10.4] De habendo dominio.

[4.5.10.5] Et si de dominio domino vilipendetur.

[4.5.10.6] De adventu alicuius domini ad terram.

[4.5.10.7] De rege aut prelato an redeant.

[4.5.10.8] Qualiter rex se habet in regno.

[4.5.10.9] De principio elevationis regis.

[4.5.10.10] De corruptione aeris.

[4.5.10.11] De paucitate pluvie et venti. De inundatione et venti et cetera.

The second sphere of application is related to warfare. Issues concerning war were relevant topics of astrological enquiry in the Middle Ages. Knowing

whether there will be a war or whether a castle will be safe, is clearly crucial for a virtuous rulership.

See for instance the following questions from the IV *Domus*:

- [4.5.4.11] De terra obsessa.
- [4.5.4.12] De navi.
- [4.5.4.13] De mora in domo vel non vel in aliquo loco.
- [4.5.4.14] De castro obsessio.
- [4.5.4.15] Si predones venient ad locum in quo es.

The third sphere of application is the most important as it generally involves ‘decision-making’, namely the process of making choices by identifying a decision, gathering information, and assessing the best course of action in a specific situation. The range of issues includes private matters (for instance *de itinere causa studii*) administrative difficulties, in particular whether someone is trustworthy or whether someone will be appointed to a certain position.

See for instance questions from the IX *Domus*:

- [4.5.9.1] De fama et infamia.
- [4.5.9.2] Si habebit ecclesiam.
- [4.5.9.3] De bono habendo apud episcopum.
- [4.5.9.4] Si querens ordinandus sit.
- [4.5.9.5] De religioso, quomodo se habeat.
- [4.5.9.6] De spe habenda.
- [4.5.9.7] De modo habendi spem vel non.
- [4.5.9.8] Si homo sit fidelis.
- [4.5.9.9] Si aliquis sit sapiens.
- [4.5.9.10] De magno somnio.
- [4.5.9.11] De itinere causa studii.
- [4.5.9.12] Quid habent figure de scientiis.
- [4.5.9.13] De peregrinatione.
- [4.5.9.14] [142ra] De eodem, si revertetur peregrinus in eodem.
- [4.5.9.15] De utilitate itineris longi vel propinqui de eodem.
- [4.5.9.16] De itinere per terram si prosperum erit.
- [4.5.9.17] De itinere maris et fluviorum.

An interesting case study is provided by Thomas Aquinas who, in 1272, writes a treatise entitled the *Lots (De sortibus)*. The aim of this treatise is to assess the validity and the permissibility of some divinatory practices, and among those that of geomancy.

According to Dondaine, editor of the *De sortibus*, Thomas Aquinas wrote this treatise at the request of the Bishop Iacopo di Tonengo, worried about the outcome of the forthcoming episcopal election. Gripped by the uncertainty of the outcome, he decided to turn to divination, hence the title of Thomas’ treatise.

Thomas exhibits in this work an extensive knowledge of the practice of geomancy and its theoretical framework<sup>38</sup>.

Thomas Aquinas only admits to the influence of the celestial bodies over terrestrial, corporeal bodies. Indeed, according to Aquinas, celestial bodies (“*corpora celestia*”) cannot affect spiritual bodies, such as the intellect or the will (in *aliquid incorporeum imprimant*’).

According to Thomas, however, the celestial bodies can exert their influence on the human body. Man acts not only through the exercise of his intellect and will (incorporeal), but also (at certain times) driven primarily by the passions that are proper to the sensitive part of the soul, linked instead to the body.

If follows that the celestial bodies can also influence human choices, indeed:

“*Quia tamen ad actus humanos non solum concurrunt uoluntas et intellectus que impressioni syderum non subduntur, sed etiam sensitua pars anime que, in eo quod corporali utitur organo, necesse est quod corporibus celestibus subiciatur, potest dici quod ex dispositione celestium corporum aliqua inclinatio fit in nobis ad hec uel illa facienda*”<sup>39</sup>.

*Therefore, since not only the will and the intellect, which are not subjected to the influence of the stars, contribute to human acts, but also the sensitive part of the soul which, in what makes use of the corporal organ, must be subjected to the celestial bodies, we can say that from the disposition of the celestial bodies, some inclination is elicited in us to do this or that.*

This is not a form of astral determinism, because man can resist this inclination by means of his intellect and will, and counteract the impact of fate. Yet reason only rules in a small number of men. The majority of people are completely unreasonable and possess neither the tools nor the desire to dominate their passions. Solomon says that infinite is the number of fools and yet reason rules only in a few men (“*stultorum, secundum Salomonem, infinitus est numerus, in paucis autem perfecte ratio dominator*”). The masses do not follow reason; hence they are not free, but subjected to astral determinism. This is why great movements (wars, revolutions, massacres), as mass movements, are easily predictable by astrologers, precisely because they are conditioned by the celestial influences that astrologers are able to interpret. On the other hand, regarding individual events, astrologers are often wrong, precisely because individual choices imply the exercise of the will that is not subjected to astral determinism:

“*Et propter hoc quandoque astrologi ex inspectione stellarum vera prenuntiant, pre-*

<sup>38</sup> Cf. THOMAS DE AQUINO, *De sortibus*, ed. Leonina, p. 208; DONDAINE, PETERS 1959; PORRO 2017, p. 185; THOMAS DE AQUINO, *L'astrologie*, éd. COUILLAUD, part. XLIX-LVI.

<sup>39</sup> THOMAS DE AQUINO, *De sortibus*, ed. Leonina, 234, ll. 150-154.



cipue circa communes eventus, quamvis in particularibus frequenter deficient propter rationem que corporibus celestibus non est subiecta”<sup>40</sup>.

*And therefore, sometimes astrologers predict the truth by the observation of the stars, especially concerning mass events, although for specific events they are often mistaken, due to the intervention of reason, which is not subjected to the celestial bodies.*

Astrology appears as a sort of statistical analysis of society. However, the same holds true for geomancy, astrology’s little sister. It is noteworthy that, right after having admitted the abilities of the astrologers to predict *quandoque communes eventus*, Thomas points out the geomantic practice, describing it as follows:

“Unde et in protractione punctorum geomantie actores hoc observandum putant ut ille qui protrahit puncta absque premeditatione rationis procedat, et ille qui consultat quasi interiori sollicitudine instigatus interroget, non quasi ex deliberatione rationis”<sup>41</sup>.

*Whence, in the drawing of the points of geomancy, the performers think that this should be observed, that he who draws the points proceed without the premeditation of reason, and that he who consults questions as though urged by an inner solicitude, and not as it were from the deliberation of reason. This they say should be observed also in all such consultations.*

Therefore, the geomantic practice is valid in itself precisely because the geomancer (“ille qui prohait puncta”) acts without the premeditation of reason, while the consultant poses his questions as driven by an inner solicitude, or almost without the deliberation of reason. Hence, celestial influences can be exerted directly on the inferior bodies without being hindered, so to speak, by an autonomous exercise of reason.

This is indeed an important prerequisite for the geomantic response and assesses its validity. As I sought to demonstrate before, the response should be detached from the individual will of the geomancer and his client, and it has to be affected by the movement and configuration of the sky only.

Therefore, if geomancy can be permissible for the judgement of mass events, there are areas in which, according to Thomas Aquinas, it is not permissible to use this practice. One of these is that of the elections ‘ad ecclesiasticas dignitates’, a case that could prove, according to Dondaine, that the *De sortibus* was composed at the request of the Bishop Iacopo di Tonengo, (possibly) eager to know in advance the outcome of the episcopal elections.

However, questions concerning the election ‘ad ecclesiasticas dignitates’ fall within the aforementioned first case of application. In fact, the variety of ques-

<sup>40</sup> THOMAS DE AQUINO, *De sortibus*, ed. Leonina, p. 234, ll. 155.

<sup>41</sup> THOMAS DE AQUINO, *De sortibus*, ed. Leonina, p. 234, ll. 159-66.

tions that can be addressed to the geomancer includes issues related to episcopal and religious offices. An interesting evidence is again provided by the *Geomantia* attributed to William of Moerbeke. It reads:

“Nona domus cadit a decima. Et est domus itineris longinqui, magni motus, vie, valde longe peregrinationis et scientie, legis, sollicitudinis, religionis, id est certantium propter leges suas, et pronosticationis legi et fidei et fiducie et cartarum, scolarum et philosophie et sapientie astrorum et ordinationis artium. Significat nuntios ecclesie, legatos et apostolicam ecclesiam, omnes viros ecclesiasticos, fidem filiorum Dei prebendam et ecclesiam petitam”<sup>42</sup>.

*The ninth house comes after the tenth. It is the house associated with long distance journeys, great movements, paths, very long pilgrimages, higher education, law, duty, religion, namely to those who strive for their laws; (it also refers to) the forecasting of future events, faith, deposits, documents, philosophy and astrology students, and the organization of the arts. It refers to papal delegates, papal legates, all the clerics, the faith of the sons of the Almighty, and sought-after ecclesiastical promotion.*

#### 4. Conclusion

Among the divinatory practices that flourished during the Middle Ages, geomancy, despite its popularity and contemporary cultural relevance, has only lately begun to receive the recognition and scholarly attention it deserves. The texts selected for this study demonstrate that this type of divination was widely used by the upper class and constituted a subject of interest and investigation for some of the finest scholars of the time. A large section of this paper discussed the role of intention in the geomantic practice. By reading a few passages of the *Geomancy* attributed to William of Moerbeke, I tried to show that the study of this divinatory art is highly promising for the field of medieval philosophy. The impact on the current debate concerning estimation and intention are just a few of the reasons that make this subject extremely valuable for our area of academic research. Scholarly editing and the production of critical editions underpin much research in the humanities, and this is especially true when the subject of interest is still buried in obscurity. The production of critical editions is absolutely vital for this research and it is now reasonable to claim that progress in this area of study will follow from the production of critical editions.

<sup>42</sup> GUILLELMUS DE MOERBECA, *Geomantia* 3.4, ed. RUBINO, K f. 11vb

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**Abstract:** Based on unpublished texts of *Estimaverunt Indi*, *Geomantia* attributed to Wilhelm of Moerbeke and *Breviloquium artis geomantie* by Bartolomew of Parma, my contribution aims at presenting a general overview of the geomantic technique and its political applications. In order to achieve this aim, I will first offer a few preliminary considerations on the concept of natural divination.

**Keywords:** Geomancy; Natural Divination; *Estimaverunt Indi*; Guglielmus de Moerbeke; Bartholomaeus Parmensis; Prognostic.

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