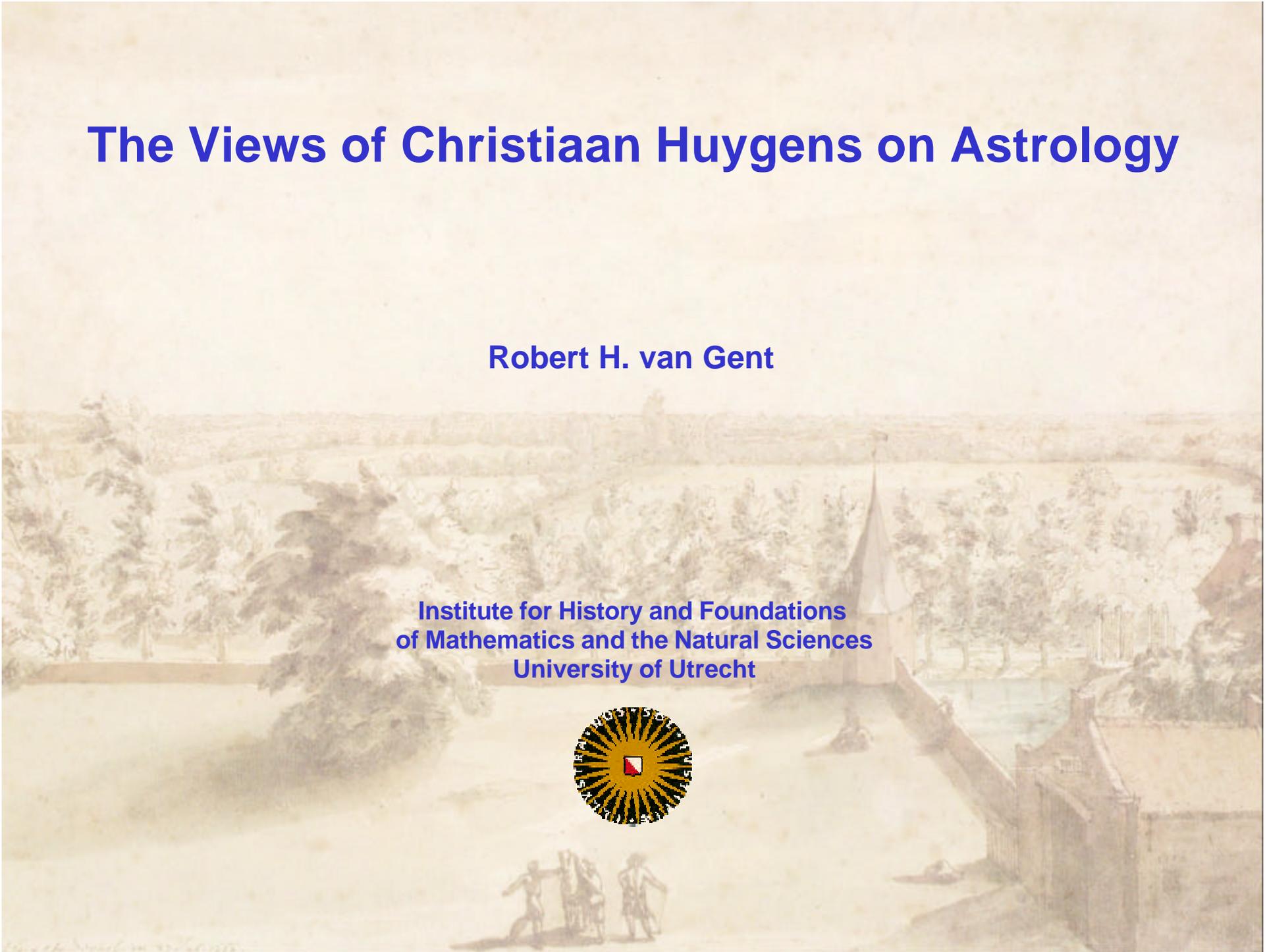


The Views of Christiaan Huygens on Astrology

Robert H. van Gent

Institute for History and Foundations
of Mathematics and the Natural Sciences
University of Utrecht



The Birth of Christiaan Huygens

Constantijn Huygens sr. (1596-1687), the father of Christiaan Huygens, made careful notes of the circumstances under which his children were born, just as his own father Christiaan Huygens sr. (1551-1624) had done for his birth and that of his brothers and sisters. The birth of his second son Christiaan was described as follows:

Christiaen ons tweede kind quam ter wereld anno XVI.^c negen en twintich den veerthienden April, zijnde Saterdagh voor Paschen, des nachts, recht ten twee uren, Zijnde het beghinsel van de voornoemde dagh, in 'tselve huys ende Salett daer Constantin geboren werde. Van daeghs te voren 's merghens begonde de moeder gewaer te werden dat haren tijd genackte, zoo dat ick, van 7 uren uyt geweest hebbende bij eene Anatomie, ten 9 uren t'huys gehaelt werde. Niettemin, het scheen over te gaen, ende at mijn' huysvrouw noch 's middags met ons aen de Tafel. Des avonds ontrent 10 uren quamen haer de weeën eerst gereckelicker aan, ende zedert den 11^{en} begon sij eenen seer harden arbeid uijt te staen, jae swaerer dan den eersten, alsoo dit kind grooter bevonden werde, wegende, ten doop-daghe, 9 ponds gewichts.

Although Constantijn sr. noted the time of his children's birth with great care, it is not known whether he had natal horoscopes cast for them. No references to such are found in any of his writings.

A Poetical Horoscope for the Stadtholder William II

In 1626, the Dutch poet Joost van den Vondel wrote the “Geboortklock van Willem van Nassau”, at the occasion of the birth of William II (1626-1650), who became stadtholder in 1647. In the following passage, the muse Urania explained the horoscope of the future stadtholder:

*[...] 'k heb gemerckt hoe d'opperlampen wemelen,
En de gesteltenis en kreysen aller hemelen,
Mèt dat uw' gemaelin verlost van haer' vrucht;
Een' Maysche son, die 't hoofd beurde in de Maysche lucht;
Doen Titan met sijn' torts den droeven nacht beschaemde,
En voor sich rijsen sagh de plaets, daer hy versaemde
Soo onlangs met Diaen: hem volleghe Erycijn,
Mercur daer op; om heer van dees' geboort te sijn:
Latonaes dochter trad den roedrigh op sijne hielen:
't Geluck steeds aengebeên van sterffelijcke zielen
In het horoscopus dese hemelstacy sloot;
Waer over Iupiter sijn' soete straelen schoot
Wt Cypris elpentron [...]*

Stripped from its mythological references, the horoscope can be seen to refer to the rising Sun (together with the ascendant and the pars fortuna in the sign of Gemini), followed shortly afterwards by Venus, Mercury and the Moon (all three in Gemini too), forming an auspicious aspect with Jupiter in the sign of Libra. Noteworthy is that the malefic planets Mars and Saturn are not mentioned in this poem.

Lessons in Astrology

A letter of 1645 by the in-house tutor Stampioen to Constantijn Huygens sr. lists the books that should be acquired for his sons Constantijn jr. and Christiaan to study. In addition to books on mathematics, optics, drawing, fortification, architecture, astronomy and arithmetic, Stampioen also mentions the following:

[...] Hier aen volcht de Astrologia, dat ja (de Astronomi verstaende) om daer uit te judiceeren, van gepasseerde ende oock van toecoomende saecken: die heel bequaem geleert can worden uit guido, ransovius, alhasen, alcabitius, &c: [O.C., vol. 1, letter 5]

Whether these books were acquired by Constantijn sr. or were used for tutoring his sons is not known. None of these books are listed in the 1695 auction catalogue of the library of Christiaan Huygens. Nor are any these books ever referred to in Christiaan's letters.

The authors mentioned by Stampioen can be identified as:

- The O.C. identify this author with the Italian marquis Guido Ubaldo de Monte (1545-1607). It is more likely that Stampioen referred to the famous Italian astrologer Guido Bonatti (1230?-1300?) and his work *Liber astronomicus, decem continens tractatus astronomie* (Erhard Ratdolt, Augsburg, 1491; Venice, 1506; Basel, 1550).
- Henricus Ranzovius [= Heinrich von Ransow; 1526-1599], *Tractatus astrologicus degenethliacorum thematum iudiciis pro singulis nati accidentibus* (Johannes Wechel, Frankfurt, 1593; Frankfurt, 1615).
- Alhasen [= Abu 'Ali al-Hasan ibn al-Hasan ibn al-Haitham; 965?-1041?].
- Alchabitius [= 'Abdal 'Aziz ibn 'Uthman Abu l-Sadr al-Qabisi; c. 960], *Libellus ysagogicus abdilazi, i[d est] servi gloriosi dei: qui d[icitur] alchabatius ad magisteriu iudicioru astroru: i[n]terpretatu a ioañe hispalensi* (Erhard Ratdolt, Venice, 1482/83; Venice, 1502/03; Paris, 1521).

A Royal Horoscope for the Stadtholder's Daughter

In 1659, the year in which Christiaan Huygens published his *Systema Saturnium*, the second daughter of the stadtholder Frederick Henry, Albertina Agnes (1634-1696) requested the young and already famous astronomer to cast her horoscope.

Christiaan's response to her was that he had no knowledge in such matters and stored little belief in this science, but in order to comply with the royal request, he would ask a knowledgeable and trustworthy man in Paris to make the necessary calculations.

The person who Christiaan had in mind was Ismaël Boulliau, who he had met during his first visit to Paris and with whom he corresponded on telescopes and other matters. In the end of 1659, Christiaan wrote to Boulliau whether he would be willing to cast the horoscope of this 'dame de grande condition'. He did not divulge her name or position as he did not want this to influence the outcome of his inquiries.



Ismaël Boulliau (1605-1694)

Shortly afterwards, Christiaan received a letter from Jean Chapelain, who, on behalf, of Boulliau, told him that there was insufficient information: the place of birth was lacking.

In his reply to Boulliau, Christiaan supplied the missing data and also partly divulged the identity of the lady as he was afraid that Boulliau would make a fool of himself if he predicted a propitious date of marriage for this lady who had been wed since 1652 to the stadtholder of Friesland, William Frederick (1613-1664).

In a following letter, Boulliau wrote that he had started with his calculations but that he also wanted to receive a fair compensation in the form of precious gems ('bijoux des jndes') for his efforts. A week later, Boulliau wrote to Christiaan that the horoscope was ready.

In subsequent letters, Christiaan informed Boulliau that he had passed the horoscope on to Albertina Agnes, the identity of whom he had now completely revealed, and that Boulliau should soon expect to receive his reward.

In March 1660, Christiaan wrote to Boulliau that Albertina Agnes was not happy with Boulliau's judgement of her horoscope as she claimed to be "gentle of character and not to be quarrelsome at all". Boulliau's response to Christiaan was that he could have erred in his judgement and that if no reward was forthcoming, he would be willing to forget the whole matter.



**Albertina Agnes and her children (Amalia, Henry Casimir II & Sophia Wilhemina)
Oil painting by Abraham van den Tempel, c. 1666 (Fries Museum, Leeuwarden)**

A Boating Accident

A report of a nearly fatal boating accident in 1666 of his elder brother Constantijn on the river Waal, near Zuilichem, was sent to Christiaan by his younger brother Lodewijk. In his letter back to Lodewijk, Christiaan wrote:

L'accident de frere de Zeelhem [= Constantijn] eust esté terrible de s'aller perdre ainsi a la Vüe de ses meilleurs et plus proches amis. Je l'en felicite de tout mon coeur d'en estre si heureusement eschappé. Si je scavois un peu au juste l'heure de sa naissance, je ferois faire par plaisir son horoscope a une personne de qualité qui croit en ces choses, en veut tousjours dresser le mien. S'il manquoit de rencontrer cette aventure, comme je crois probablement qu'il feroit j'aurois de quoy luy faire la guerre et a tout sa science.
[O.C., vol. 6, letter 1557]

Lodewijk could easily have obtained the natal hour of Constantijn jr. from Constantijn sr. but it is not known whether he did so or whether he sent this information to Paris.



Constantijn Huygens jr. (1628-1697)



**View of the Waal and the Bommelerwaard from Zuulichem
Colour drawing by Constantijn Huygens (27 July 1666)**

Astrology Rejected

During his last years, Christiaan Huygens adopted a more resolute position on the usefulness of astrology.

In his *Cosmotheoros*, published after his death by his brother Constantijn, Christiaan wrote:

And as for the Judicial Astrology, that pretends to foretel what is to come, it is such a ridiculous, and oftentimes mischievous Folly, that I do not think it fit to be so much as named.

[p. 68 of the English translation]

CHRISTIANI HUGENII ΚΟΣΜΟΘΕΩΡΟΣ,

SIVE

De Terris Cœlestibus, earumque ornatu,

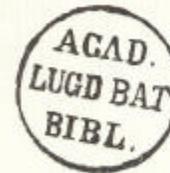
CONJECTURÆ.

AD

CONSTANTINUM HUGENIUM,

Fratrem:

GULIELMO III. MAGNÆ BRITANNIÆ REGI,
A SECRETIS.



HAGÆ-COMITUM,
Apud ADRIANUM MOETJENS, Bibliopolam.

M. DC. XCVIII.