

# **Johannes Kepler, the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II and the jurisdictional conflict between the Papal States and the *Serenissima* Republic of Venice**

**By  
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Die Mitwelt hat dich um den Lohn beraubt,  
die Nachwelt dir nur das Gesetz geglaubt;  
was du vom Wesen sprachst, wer mocht es hören?  
(Friedrich Doldinger)

(Your contemporaries denied you just reward,  
Your successors gave credence only to your laws.  
Who heeded what you said about the soul?)

## ***Foreword***

Upon the death of Pope Leo XI in April 1605 after a mere 27-day reign, the cardinals of the Church of Rome gathered in conclave and elevated in an even shorter span Cardinal Camillo Borghese, as Pope Paul V, to the throne of St Peter. Relatively young at 53, in robust health and of impeccable moral character, he ascended to this highest of ecclesiastical offices bringing broad experience within the Church and, in a nod to his barrister father, the critical acumen of a canonist of recognised ability. According to his major-domo, G.B. Costaguti, Paul V was “tall of stature, handsome of countenance, austere personable, diligent, circumspect, upright, charitable, honest...not easy to persuade, courteous, frugal of habit and modest in dress”.

Yet at the beginning of his papacy Paul V evinced an especially uncompromising spirit, perhaps as a warning not to mistake his otherwise affable ways as weakness of character. Indeed, he showed no qualms in letting one Piccinardi from Cremona, author of a defamatory libel against Pope Clement VIII, his own seneschal and several members of his court entourage executed for selling certain benefices, ascend to the highest step of the gallows. But he was most intransigent when it came to defending the rights that canon law and tradition had always conferred upon the Church vis à vis claims advanced by other sovereigns or states.

His mettle was soon to be put to the test. When, in the same year of his ascendancy, the Republic of Venice enacted two laws unmistakably designed to enable it to exert greater control over the activities of the Church, (1), as well as to demonstrate its own unswerving resolve, the Republic unhesitatingly ordered the Abbot Brandolino of Nervesa and the canon Saraceni of Vicenza arrested on a charge of petty crimes and remanded to the civil, rather than the ecclesiastical, authorities for judgement. Paul V lost not a moment in convening the Venetian ambassador for consultations, requesting that both laws be abrogated and the

ecclesiastics released. He then made public in December 1605 the contents of two briefs detailing the requests of the Holy See and threatened the Venetians with excommunication and territorial interdiction if they refused to comply.

With the conflict now out in the open and the symbolic stakes at their highest, all of Europe fixed its gaze on the contending parties. After exchanges of diplomatic notes, the proliferation of libels and publicly proclaimed polemics, the Pope issued his ultimatum during a consistory in April 1606: if the papal requests were not complied with in twenty four-hours, the Doge and the Venetian Senate would be excommunicated and the lands of the Republic placed under interdiction.

***‘The Emperor Rudolph was the grandson of Johanna the Mad on both sides of the family...Towards 1600 rumours began spreading that so was he. (Golo Mann, *Wallenstein*)***

The throne of the Holy Roman Empire was then occupied by Rudolph II von Habsburg, who held court in Prague. Golo Mann describes him thus in his monumental masterpiece *Wallenstein*:

«An inept hereditary monarch seems far less surprising than a sovereign who, appointed by electors who can choose, fails to measure up to the task, as sometimes happens. But, by any measure, Rudolph, a crowned heir of hereditary sovereigns, threw away his inheritance. It wasn't that he lacked exquisite qualities. Endowed with sharp intellect when not blinded by momentary impulsiveness, he was aware, all too exasperatingly so, of the grandiose nature of his role; he was tenacious and possessed of a keen eye for art. Thanks to the residence of his court, Prague became a metropolis, a stimulating playground for people of different languages, diverse talents and the most disparate leanings. If on the one hand his half-Spanish ancestry led him to be resolute once he was forced to make up his political mind, it did not on the other lead him to shun a circle of court intimates that included Protestant foreigners — artists from the Low Countries and Italy, physician-philosophers and humanists from Slesia and upper Hungary, the Dane Tycho Brahe and the Swabian Johannes Kepler among them. His court became a magnet for all sorts of characters and mountebanks, the divide between science and magic being as yet rather blurred. Rudolph himself dabbled in astronomy, physics, medicine, even trying his hand at intaglio-work and clock-making. Eclectic in his tastes, he took pleasure in what was considered antique or classical—he was wont to pay any price for paintings by Albrecht Dürer—as well as the novel and daring. The line between dreams and madness that he bestrode seemed equally blurred.» (2)

The importance of the confrontation between Venice and the papacy did not escape his notice, and he at once asked Johannes Kepler, the Imperial Mathematician since 1601, for a reasoned astrological opinion. It just so happened that the famed scientist had studied a triple conjunction of Mars-Jupiter-Saturn in the central degrees of Sagittarius in September 1604 and had written a report on its significance. Thus, in May 1606, at the height of the political crisis between Venice and the Holy See, Kepler informed the Emperor:

## Letter of Johannes Kepler to Emperor Rudolph II.

To the most powerful and invincible Roman Emperor Rudolph II from Johannes Kepler

Most Powerful Emperor!

As I have often declared, I am not of the opinion that the heavens meddle in earthly affairs in any determining way. Yet, since I have been asked, I shall forthwith tell you the opinion of the astrologers.

A new star is shining in Sagittarius. Venice is coming under the influence of Cancer. There is thus no relationship between this movement and the new star, it being just another element in the general situation of the terrestrial globe.

But, by contrast, we find a solar eclipse at  $18^\circ$  of Libra in the first quadrangle; Venice too is under the first quadrangle, that is, under Cancer. And this fact seems to have arisen at the very onset of the eclipse, that is, last October. It doubtless arose under the new Pope, who ascended the throne less than a year ago. Thus, in the view of astrologers, the solar eclipse is connected to this latter fact. To this I shall add an astronomical argument, a plausible one indeed, according to my own opinion. This was a total eclipse in the Tyrrhenian Sea, below Rome, traversing the Neapolitan and Calabria and Sicily, as well as the borders of France, Spain and the Pyrenees. It therefore bodes ill and should involve the French, the *Patrimonium Petri* and the Italian princes; and more than all others the King of Spain and Venice, because of the maritime route between West and East, will be subject to the eclipse, the former for the Spanish and the latter for Venetians. Thus, according to the opinion of the astrologers, there are many reasons why the Venetians are against the Pope.

First: the eclipse does not occur in the Medium Coeli above the city of Venice, nor is it Ascendant or in the place of the Sun. Rather, it is exactly at the Bottom of the Sky, and in opposition to the Sun. This because Venice was founded when the Sun, at the 6th degree of Aries, was in the Medium Coeli, but the Pope was born when the Sun was at  $4^\circ$  in Libra, near to the place of the eclipse and, hence, precisely in opposition to the position of the Sun for the city of Venice; all of this will make the astrologers rejoice.

Moreover: for Venice the Sun is in its own exaltation, for the Pope it is in its fall.

Third: the constellations in April and May 1606, when the conflict erupted, were similar to the constellations for Venice.

Fourth: Saturn was in the fourth aspect (that is, square) with the Sun of both. But this is not adverse to Venice because at its very founding the Sun was in a position opposite to this planet.

Fifth: Jupiter was then between  $28^\circ$  and  $29^\circ$  of Aquarius, in the position occupied by Saturn in the Pope's nativity: and in the house of Saturn; and it itself is travelling (perhaps he means in direct motion).

Sixth: this Pope seems born to provoke much trouble; this because there was great opposition between Saturn and Jupiter in Leo and Aquarius, without the Sun's intervention, so that such trouble will tend to worsen. This is also because Saturn is, more so than Jupiter, stronger in Aquarius. Then too the Middle of the Sky was at  $10^\circ$  of Sagittarius, in the position of the great conjunction that took place in December 1603.

Seventh: the Pope has his Mars in Cancer, the sign of the Venetians, which once again will make astrologers rejoice. And since Cancer is the sign of the fall of Mars, the astrologers will say that war against Venice will not have a favourable outcome. Venice, instead, has Mars in Libra, which is indeed a drawback for Mars (that is why Cardano said the Venetians will not be warriors upon whom fortune will smile), although they have it in the position of the Pope's Sun, where the Sun is in its fall, and in the position of the eclipse. Thus the astrologers will say there will not be a

great war but the Venetians will wreak much more damage. And since the eclipse took place for the Pope in the place of Mercury and in the fourth aspect of Mars, it is the most evident sign that this affair is to be conducted with supremacy and astuteness.

Eighth: Luca Gaurico predicted dominion for the Venetians up to the year 1880. Instead, according to the celestial figure cast on 18 April 1506, which he attributes to the reconstruction of the Church of St Peter under pope Julius II, he writes the following: «Unhealthy stars with the austral south Node forewarn of unfavourable *dispendia* and will last up to the virginal birth in the year 1571, or at most up to the year 1608.»

Ninth: nor should be ignored the fact that there was no premonitory sign for Venice, which instead there was for the year 1571, when the loss of Cyprus and the burning of its own (Venice's) arsenal were prefigured. But at Rome, not long before the beginning of 1606, or the end of 1605, there was a great flood. And the great wind that occurred at Easter 1606, was common throughout Europe, sign of a wet year to come.

Tenth: if someone wished to play with chance, it may be done with the next solar eclipse of 1605 (this is an evident error, perhaps Kepler meant 1606). The Sun stands for the Pope, the Moon for Venice, because she is the lady of the seas, and the Turks—who hold sway over the Venetians and whom the astrologers represent with the Moon; and the latter is powerful in Cancer, the sign of the Venetians. The Moon thus obscures the Sun in the ascendant node because she was at her zenith when the Sun was falling .

Eleventh: the direction of the Sun in the Pope's cast figure is in the fourth aspect with Saturn, precisely at this moment, when it moves in accordance with the daily path of the sun, as I always do. But this is thought to be a calamity.

This, I think, will be the opinion of the astrologers, who defend the lordship of the planets. Yet they will have to attend the unfolding of events to claim certainty. I could not refuse what was asked of me. God protect the just cause and unite the Christian forces against the common enemy, through whose agency the doors of Christendom will open to them.

May 1606

To His Highness and Imperial Majesty your most devoted  
Mathematicus Johann Kepler

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### ***The astrological coordinates***

The data Kepler has left us makes it possible to reconstruct Paul V's nativity figure. Let us now look at each item in turn.

- “the Pope was born when the Sun was at 4° of Libra”;
- “Jupiter was then between 28° and 29° of Aquarius, in the position occupied by Saturn in the Pope's nativity: and in the house of Saturn”;
- “This Pope seems born to provoke much trouble: this because there was great opposition between Saturn and Jupiter in Leo and Aquarius”;
- “Moreover Medium Coeli was at 10° of Sagittarius”;
- “the Pope has his Mars in Cancer”.

We also know that Camillo Borghese was born at Rome on 17 September 1552, according to the Julian calendar, or 27 September 1552 according to that

used today. If we cast the Pope's figure for Rome at 4:15 pm, we come up with the following astrological positions:

Sun	04 degrees 17' 55"	Libra	
Moon	22 degrees 10'	Virgo	
Mercury	23 degrees 15'	Libra	
Venus	00 degrees 04'	Libra	
Mars	22 degrees 04'	Cancer	
Jupiter	25 degrees 18'	Leo	(Retrograde)
Saturn	28 degrees 06'	Aquarius	
Uranus	12 degrees 41'	Libra	
Neptune	12 degrees 42'	Taurus	(Retrograde)
Pluto	28 degrees 54'	Aquarius	(Retrograde)
Ascending node	15 degrees 33'	Leo	
Medium Coeli	09 degrees 12'	Sagittarius	
Ascendant	21 degrees 58'	Aquarius	

Kepler also implies he took into account the solar eclipse that occurred the month before his detailed analysis in April 1606. Indeed, he notes: "But, by contrast, we find a solar eclipse at 18° of Libra in the first quadrangle". This event took place in fact on 7 April, though not precisely at 18° of Aries but at 17°20'. Here Kepler shows us that he's following in the footsteps of Ptolemy, who in his celebrated *Tetrabiblos* set forth the equation 'the influence of the eclipse is equal to its visibility.' In other words, "the eclipse concerns only that part of the world in which it is above the horizon, i.e. its window of visibility. It involves the country or countries corresponding to the sign wherein it occurs, right down to a given city in the region, especially if the degree of the eclipse falls on the Ascendant or a luminary at the moment of its founding or even on Medium Coeli of the nativity of the prince governing it." (3) The following list includes the astrological positions of the eclipse on 7 April 1606 as calculated for 11.30 AM at Prague.

Sun	17 degrees 20' 57"	Aries	
Moon	17 degrees 27'	Aries	
Mercury	29 degrees 08'	Pisces	
Venus	25 degrees 17'	Taurus	
Mars	09 degrees 33'	Sagittarius	
Jupiter	24 degrees 39'	Aquarius	
Saturn	07 degrees 24'	Capricorn	
Uranus	23 degrees 54'	Taurus	
Neptune	08 degrees 51'	Virgo	(Retrograde)
Pluto	28 degrees 19'	Aries	
Ascending node	00 degrees 19'	Libra	
Medium Coeli	08 degrees 06'	Aries	
Ascendant	00 degrees 59'	Leo	

Let us also recall that while he attributes to Venice the sign of Cancer, Kepler uses the figure of the city's founding under Aries, with the Sun elevated to Medium Coeli at 6° of the sign. He then proceeds to overlay the figure of the recent solar eclipse with the figures of the two contending parties and to compare the Pope's figure against those of Venice. Kepler thus seems to be telling us that

to his mind (or, as he repeatedly couches his opinion, ‘according to the astrologers’) the astrological indicators were more unfavourable to the Pope than to the *Serenissima* Republic.

### ***The last act***

Venice took advantage of the clash to banish *en masse* the Capuchins, Teatines and the Jesuits in June 1606, the latter long deemed *personae non gratae* by the city’s authorities, and both states hurriedly began to arm themselves for the looming conflict. At this point King Henri IV of France entered the fray, mediating between the parties through his trusted relation Cardinal François de Joyeuse. An honourable compromise was reached under which the *Serenissima* handed over the two imprisoned ecclesiastics to the cardinal, in gratitude for his diplomatic efforts, agreed to let the banished religious orders return (except the Jesuits, who had to wait until 1657) but did not abrogate the two contentious statutes; the Holy See revoked the censures of excommunication and interdiction. As the historian Carlo Falconi noted:

“While it’s true that the Republic failed to attain its ambitious objective, mainly because it was unable to rally support from other states, despite the fact they also stood to gain from a Venetian victory, it lost nothing in the end. Rome, on the other hand, forced to defend a status quo that was advantageous to it, managed not to compromise the situation but failed to strengthen its hand. Indeed, even the brandishing of its most powerful spiritual armaments left the papacy in a sort of stalemate and, more importantly, revealed how inadequate such weapons were. Paul V certainly would not have seen himself as being the last pontiff to hurl an interdiction in the face of a sovereign state, but he surely must have realised that something had been irrevocably lost in the confrontation with the *Serenissima*.”

### Footnotes

- 1) The two laws respectively prohibited the founding of convents, churches, hospitals or other religious houses without the Senate’s permission and the inheriting by any means whatsoever of new real properties by ecclesiastical persons or entities.
- 2) Golo Mann, *Wallenstein*, Sansoni, Florence, 1981, p. 42.
- 3) André Barbault, *Introduction à l’astrologie mondiale*, Éditions du Rocher, Monaco, 2004, p. 123.

### References

Carlo Falconi, *Storia dei Papi*, CEI/Compagnia Edizioni Internazionali - Rome/Milan, vol. IV, 1972  
All the historical facts cited was taken from this volume, pp. 545 ff.

Golo Mann, *Wallenstein*, Sansoni, Florence, 1981

Johannes Hemleben, *Kepler*, Rowohlt, Hamburg, 1971

Udo Becker, *Lexicon der Astrologie*, Herder, Freiburg, 1997

This fine book includes in facsimile a reprint of the original *Astrologie* by Julius Wilhelm Andreas Pfaff (Nürnberg, 1816) containing the text of Kepler's letter to Rudolph II.

André Barbault, *Introduction à l'astrologie mondiale*, Éditions du Rocher, Monaco, 2004.