The Star of Arabia: Inspiration and Antonomasia from the Pleiades

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Abstract. As in Mesopotamia, Arabs prior to Islam so celebrated the remarkable star cluster known to modern astronomy as the Pleiades that they invoked it antonomastically as "the Star" *(al-najm)*. Known as *al-thurayyā* in Arabic, this star cluster's name signified abundance, and it may have been chosen for its number of stars or for the heavy rains that fell when it set in the morning twilight. Taking this single asterism as its subject, this paper draws from Arabic source texts from pre-Islam through the early Islamic period to illuminate the breadth and depth of Arabic rhymed prose, poetry and religious verse that the Star inspired. This paper traces the rich multivalency of meaning derived from visual observations of the orientation and position of the Star in the sky at various times of night and seasons of the year, from poetic descriptions of its changing aspect as it crossed the sky to self-contained seasonal mini-calendars that were expressed and memorized through rhymed prose.

Introduction

The striking Pleiades star cluster has been celebrated by many cultures throughout the world. One of the most conspicuous asterisms in the sky, the Pleiades consists of six stars that are prominently visible to the unaided eye, with up to fifteen visible under dark, pristine skies by observers who have excellent eyesight. The brightest stars in the cluster are arranged in a pattern that resembles the Big Dipper and cover an area of sky that appears four times larger than the full moon does, rendering the asterism easily identifiable in clear skies.

In Arabia, the Pleiades star cluster has long been a source of inspiration and was described in pre-Islamic poetry as early as the beginning of the sixth century CE. This research traces this singular celestial object through the earliest centuries of Arabic rhymed prose, poetry and religious verse in order to demonstrate the rich multivalency of meaning that can stem from a single renowned asterism. Sources for this study also include the extant Abbasid-era Arabic historical sources that treat this topic, including *Kitāb al-Asmina wa talbiyat al-jāhiliyya* by Quṭrub (d. 821 CE), *Kitāb al-anwāʿ*

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by Ibn Qutayba (d. 889 CE), portions of a work by Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 896 CE), as transmitted by Ibn Sīda (d. 1066 CE) in his *Kitāb al-mukhaṣṣaṣ*, *Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib* by al-Ṣūfī (d. 986 CE), and *Kitāb al-azmina wa 'l-amkina* by al-Marzūqī (d. 1030 CE).[1]

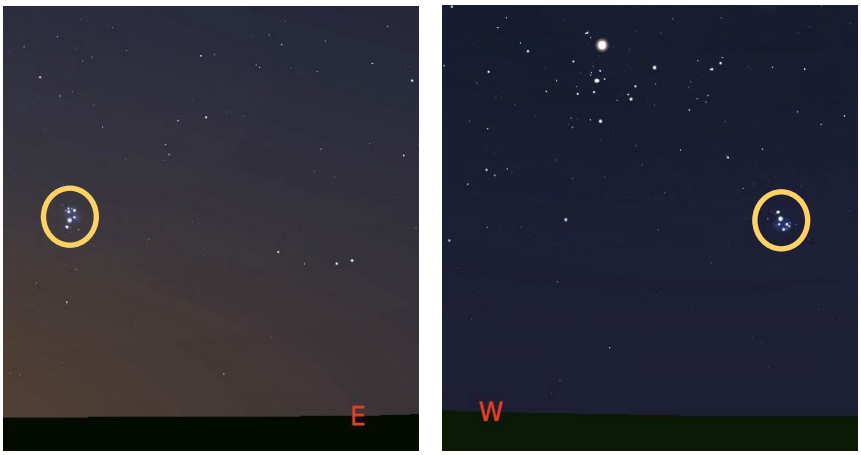

Fig. 1. Aspect changes of the Pleiades star cluster *(al-thurayyā)* from rising in the east to setting in the west.

In what follows, the visual appearance of the renowned asterism is often the source of the metaphorical description that a poet has attributed to it. This visual appearance changes as the star cluster moves across the sky, from its place of rising in the east until it culminates overhead and then sets into the western horizon. When it rises, its orientation is such that its brightest stars are broadly arranged at the top and narrowly arranged at the bottom; when it sets, the cluster appears thinner at its upper left and broadens as the cluster extends to the bottom right. Because the Pleiades is so large and has a well-defined, non-circular shape among its brightest

[1] Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad b. al-Mustanīr Quṭrub, *Kitāb al-azmina wa talbiyat al-jāhiliyya,* ed. Ḥatim Ṣāmiḥ al-Ḍāmin (Beirut: Muʾassisat al-Risāla, 1985); Abū Muḥammad ʿAbdallah b. Muslim Ibn Qutayba al-Dīnawarī, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ (fī mawāsim al-ʿArab)* (Hyderabad: Maṭbaʿat Majlis Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1956); Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Ismāʿīl Ibn Sīda, *Kitāb al-mukhaṣṣaṣ,* 16 vols (Būlāk, Egypt: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Kubrā al-Amīriyya, 1898-1903); Abū al-Ḥusayn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿUmar al-Ṣūfī, *Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib al-thamāniya wa al-arbaʿīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, 1981); Abū ʿAlī Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina wa al-amkina,* 2 vols (Hyderabad: Maṭbaʿat Majlis Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-Kāʾina, 1914).

stars, Arab poets described the changing aspect of the asterism as it moved across the sky during the course of the night.

Moreover, because the aspect changes so much from rising to setting, certain poetic descriptions of the star grouping necessarily indicate whether it was described while rising or setting. When a time of night is indicated, the aspect of the asterism defines a seasonal timeframe as well.

Arabic Antonomasia of the Pleiades

The Pleiades star cluster was and remains known within Arabia as *al-thurayyā,* a proper name (rendered in this paper as al-Thurayyā) that likely derived from the word *tharwa*, which indicated an abundance or great quantity of something, in this case the stars that the cluster contains.[2] Ibn Qutayba described the star cluster as 'six conspicuous stars in whose gap are many faint stars'.[3] In addition this Arabic root may have referenced the abundant rain that fell as it approached the point of setting into the western horizon at the end of the night, in late October and early November. Similar in sound to *tharwa* was the term *tharan*, meaning moisture, the consequence of the heavy rains that the asterism heralded. Grammatically, the word *al-thurayyā* is feminine and diminutive in form, giving it a sense of endearment similar to the English terms 'dearie' or 'horsey', so the name could be translated as 'the Little Abundant One'.

The poet Dhū al-Rumma (d. 735 CE) compared the sight of the bright stars of al-Thurayyā in the sky to white ostrich eggs in a wasteland:

> She raises them aloft in the ostrich nest as eggs in a wasteland, just as the asterism of al-Thurayyā emerges between the clouds.[4]

The word translated as 'asterism' in this line of poetry is *najm*, a term that indicated a star or asterism. So celebrated was this particular star cluster that al-Thurayyā was evoked antonomastically—substituting the general term for the proper name—as 'the Star' *(al-najm)*. Ibn Qutayba reported, 'When you hear them mentioning "the Star" without attributing anything

[2] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.23; Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon,* 8 vols. (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1997), v.1, p.335.

[3] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.23: *sittat anjumi zāhirati fī khalalihā nujūmu kathīratu khafiyyatu.*

[4] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.24: *tuʿālīhu fī l-udḥiyyi bayḍan bi-qafratin ka-najmi th-thurayyā lāḥa bayna s-saḥāʾibi*.

to it, know that they mean al-Thurayyā'.[5] Ibn Qutayba also noted that Arabs mentioned al-Thurayyā more abundantly than any other star or asterism, and indeed this is evident from the multitude of references to al-Thurayyā or the Star in the extant poetry and rhymed prose.[6] The use of antonomasia in connection with this star cluster is a striking example of the shared cultural meaning that this asterism embodied.

A third name that Arabs applied to the Pleiades star cluster was the Fatty Tail of the Lamb *(alyat al-ḥamal)*.[7] The large size of this star cluster compared to that of a single star in the sky may have reminded them of the fleshy tail of a fat-tailed lamb. Apart from this tail, the Arabian Lamb *(al-ḥamal)* closely matched the stars of the Greek constellation Aries, with the two brightest stars of modern Aries marking the Two Horns of the Lamb *(qarnā al-ḥamal)* and a fainter trio of stars between the Two Horns and the Fatty Tail representing the Little Belly *(al-buṭayn)* or the Belly of the Lamb *(baṭn al-ḥamal)*.[8] Al-Thurayyā did not appear in early poetry or rhymed prose under the name of the Fatty Tail of the Lamb.

Celestial Circumstances

Because of the previously mentioned aspect changes of al-Thurayyā as it moves across the sky, most of the references to the star cluster in poetry can be connected to a particular seasonal apparition of the asterism in Arabian skies. In rhymed prose, the texts themselves call out this information explicitly. Together, these cultural texts reveal six separate circumstances during which al-Thurayyā was observed and which provided inspiration for Arabic oral traditions.

The most significant time of night for observing stars in Arabia was a portion of morning twilight called *ghalas*, which Arabic lexicographers defined as:

> The darkness of the last part of the night, when it becomes mixed with the light of the dawn; or the beginning of dawn, until it spreads

[5] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.24: *fa-idhā samaʿtuhum yadhkurūna n-najm min ghayri an yansibūhu ilā shayʾin fa-iʿlam annahum yurīdūna th-thurayyā.*
[6] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.23.
[7] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.23; al-Ṣūfī, *Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib*, p.153; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.1, p.188.
[8] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, pp.17, 20–21; al-Ṣūfī, *Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib*, p.142; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.1, p.187.

> in the tracts of the horizon…both signify blackness mixed with whiteness and redness.[9]

The presence of white and red light spreading in the tracts of the horizon while the sky is still generally dark points to a specific period of morning twilight, a period when the brighter stars are still visible but the fainter ones have already been extinguished by the growing light of dawn. The corresponding period in evening twilight was also used to observe stars.

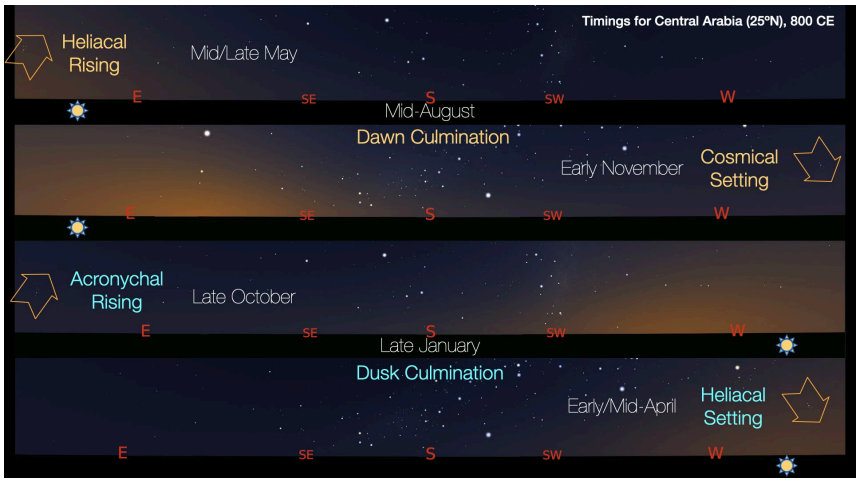

Fig. 2. The six circumstances for the Pleiades star cluster *(al-thurayyā)* in Arabic poetry and rhymed prose.

The six circumstances during which al-Thurayyā (and many other stars) was observed were the rising, overhead culmination, and setting of the star cluster during either *ghalas* in the morning twilight or its corresponding period in evening twilight. Calculating the corresponding seasonal timings for these six circumstances for a representative location in central Arabia at 25ºN latitude and a representative year of 800 CE yields the following timings:

- *Heliacal rising*, the first observable rising of al-Thurayyā in the east in the growing light of morning twilight: mid to late May
- *Dawn culmination,* the culmination of al-Thurayyā overhead in the growing light of morning twilight: mid-August

[9] Lane, *Lexicon,* v.6, p.2281.

- *Cosmical setting*, the first observable setting of al-Thurayyā in the west in the growing light of morning twilight: early November
- *Acronychal rising***,** the last observable rising of al-Thurayyā in the east in the waning light of evening twilight: late October
- *Dusk culmination*, the culmination of al-Thurayyā overhead in the waning light of evening twilight: late January
- *Heliacal setting,* the last observable setting of al-Thurayyā in the west in the waning light of evening twilight: early to mid-April

In practice, the observed seasonal timing depends on the latitude of the observer on the earth, precession of the equinoxes, locally observable horizon lines, atmospheric clarity during the observation, and the brightness of the star being observed.

Inspiration at the Star's Heliacal Rising (mid/late May)

The heliacal rising of al-Thurayyā ahead of the Sun in the light of dawn occurred in mid to late May, and this apparition marked the beginning of 'summer' *(al-ṣayf)* in the Arabian two-season year.[10] As shown in Figure 1, the aspect of al-Thurayyā when it rises out of the eastern horizon resembles that of a flagpole with its flag outstretched to the right. Ibn Qutayba said, 'When it rises, it welcomes the observer to it by its nose'.[11]

Mid-May in Arabia was the time of year when the weather became vehemently hot, and there was no rain. The association of this weather with the heliacal rising of the Star was committed to memory through rhymed prose, an ancient art form that featured a rhyme at the end of each phrase but lacked the internal meter of poetry. This structure made memorization and oral transmission easy, much like modern nursery rhymes. When connected to the heliacal rising of a star or asterism, these pieces of rhymed prose described seasonal conditions including changes in the weather and floral, faunal, and social behaviours.

> When rises the Star, summer heat sets a vehement bar, and dried herbage breaks apart.

[10] Quṭrub, *Kitāb al-azmina*, p.25.
[11] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, pp.24–25: *wa hiya idhā ṭalaʿat tastaqbilu n-nāẓira ilayhā bi-unfihā*.

(and herds of onagers with their front teeth spar.).[12]

During their summer mating season, onagers (wild asses) became aggressive and nipped each other in the rump.

Another piece of rhymed prose took up additional seasonal aspects:

> When rises the Star, meat is most protected by far, feared is when one feels below par, and on the hills the midday mirage shimmers afar.[13]

For this piece of rhymed prose, Ibn Qutayba, Abū Ḥanīfa and al-Marzūqī each recorded all four phrases. During this hot period of the year, meat was protected from the heat, lest it spoil and make someone sick. Ibn Qutayba attributed this particular piece of rhymed prose to 'their Doctor' *(ṭabībuhum)*, indicating 'the Doctor of the Arabs' *(ṭabīb al-ʿarab)*, a nickname for the renowned Arab physician al-Ḥārith bin Kalada (d. 634 or 635 CE). Ibn Qutayba commented that the Doctor had given the Arabs instructions to avoid foods that would be harmful to them and had informed them that the inferior mirage or heat shimmer *(sarāb)* did not appear before the rising of the Star. This affirmed that summer began with the heliacal rising of al-Thurayyā.

A final piece of rhymed prose for the heliacal rising of the Star in the morning twilight was paired with a piece of rhymed prose for the acronychal rising of the Star during evening twilight. The piece that referenced the heliacal rising follows here:

> When rises the Star in a short period of morning twilight, the shepherd earnestly seeks a small waterskin outright.[14]

This short piece of rhymed prose described what a shepherd needed when the weather was hot: a ready source of water by his side.

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[12] Quṭrub, *Kitāb al-azmina*, p.25; Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, pp.25–26; Ibn Sīda, *Kitāb al-mukhaṣṣaṣ,* v.9, p.15. With some variations, the Arabic reads: *idhā ṭalaʿa n-najm, fa-ṣ-ṣayfu fī ḥad(a)m, wa-l-ʿushbu fī ḥaṭ(a)m (wa-l-ʿānātu fī kadm).*

[13] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.31; Ibn Sīda, *Kitāb al-mukhaṣṣaṣ,* v.9, p.15; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.180. With some variations, the Arabic reads: *idhā ṭalaʿa n-najm, uttuqiya l-laḥm, wa-khīfa s-suqm wa-jarā s-sarābu ʿalā l-ukm.*

[14] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.29; Ibn Sīda, *Kitāb al-mukhaṣṣaṣ,* v.9, p.15; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.180. With some variations, the Arabic reads: *idhā ṭalaʿa n-najmu ghudayya, ibtaghā r-rāʿī shukayya.*

The Umayyad desert poet Dhū al-Rumma (d. 735 CE) connected the heliacal rising of al-Thurayyā to the time when plants dried up and broke:

> She remained with him until the stem withered and became bent, and the morning twilight drove al-Thurayyā in its sheets.[15]

In another poem, Dhū al-Rumma mentioned the presence of al-Thurayyā during the morning period of *ghalas* as coincident with the sizzling of reservoirs in the sweltering heat:

> When the observer saw al-Thurayyā in the commingling of light and darkness in the early morning twilight, and the trickle of natural reservoirs actually sizzled.[16]

The bright red star known today as Aldebaran owes its IAU-approved name to its indigenous Arabic name: the Follower *(al-dabarān)*, a name bestowed on the star because it follows close behind al-Thurayyā.[17] The Follower was also called the Follower of the Star (*tābiʿ al-najm* or *tālī al-najm*).[18] The Follower was the subject of a longer piece of rhymed prose:

> When rises the Follower, the rugged lands become vehemently hotter, loathed is fire, flies are inflamed in a fluster, brooks turn into vapor, and children throw themselves wherever.[19]

During this hot part of the summer, just two or three weeks after the heliacal rising of al-Thurayyā, the heat made fires uncomfortable, and flies became more abundant. Similar to the line of poetry from Dhū al-Rumma

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[15] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.30: *aqāmat bihi ḥattā dhuwiya l-ʿūdu wa ltawā wa sāqa th-thurayyā fị mulāʾatihi l-fajru.*

[16] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.30: *fa-lammā raʾā r-rāʾī th-thurayyā bi-sudfatin wa nashshat niṭāfu l-mubaqayāti l-waqāʾiʿi.*

[17] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.37; al-Ṣūfī, *Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib*, p.154; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.1, p.188.

[18] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, pp.37–38; al-Ṣūfī, *Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib*, p.154; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.1, p.188.

[19] Quṭrub, *Kitāb al-azmina*, p.25; Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.39; Ibn Sīda, *Kitāb al-mukhaṣṣaṣ,* v.9, p.15; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.180. With some variations, the Arabic reads: *idhā ṭalaʿa d-dabarān, tawaqqadati l-ḥizzān, wa-kurihati n-nīrān, wa-staʿarati dh-dhabbān, wa-yabisati l-ghadrān, wa-rammat bi-ʾanfusihā ḥaythu shāʾati ṣ-ṣabyān.*

cited above, this piece of rhymed prose also described bodies of water evaporating.

Another bright star further from the Pleiades, known today as Capella, was called the Watcher of al-Thurayyā *(raqīb al-thurayyā)* because it rose out of the eastern horizon at nearly the same time as al-Thurayyā.[20] A more prominent name for this star was the Impeder *(al-ʿayyūq)* or the Impeder of al-Thurayyā *(ʿayyūq al-thurayyā)*.[21] This name is connected to a story in which al-Thurayyā was betrothed to the Follower, but the Impeder prevents the two of them from meeting.[22] The greater distance between al-Thurayyā and the Impeder was said by some to indicate that she successfully resisted the Impeder.[23] A curved line of three stars that rise after the Impeder was called the Followers of the Impeder *(tawābiʿ al-ʿayyūq)*.[24] Another star that lies between the Impeder and the Follower was called the Foot of the Impeder *(rijl al-ʿayyūq)*.[25]

The Umayyad poet al-Akhṭal (d. 710 CE) mentioned the dawn rising of the Impeder with the Star:

> When the Impeder and the Star rise, their lead camels [at night] insert between the Two Sky-Raisers and the Heart.[26]

During mid to late May, when the Impeder and the Star rose together in the ghalas of dawn twilight, the Heart of the Scorpion *(qalb al-ʿaqrab)*, the bright red star known today as Antares, had its acronychal rising in the evening twilight. Above the Heart was a pair of bright stars that were widely separated in the sky, the Two Sky-Raisers *(al-simākān)*, known today as Arcturus and Spica. The poet noted that when the Impeder and the Star rose in the morning, the camel drivers in the evening would aim the camels between the Two Sky-Raisers, just south of eastward.

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[20] Al-Ṣūfī, *Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib*, p.92.
[21] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, pp.34–35; al-Ṣūfī, *Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib*, p.92; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.377.
[22] Maḥmūd Salīm al-Ḥūt, *Fī ṭarīq al-mīthūlūjīyā ʿind al-ʿArab: Baḥth mushab fī al-muʿtaqadāt wa al-asāṭīr al-ʿArabiyya qabla al-Islām* (Beirut: M.S. al-Ḥūt, 1955).
[23] Al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.377.
[24] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.37; al-Ṣūfī, *Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib*, p.92; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.377.
[25] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.37; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.377.
[26] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.36: *idhā ṭalaʿa l-ʿuyyūqu wa n-najmu awlijat sawālifuhā bayna s-simākayni wa l-qalbi*.

Inspiration at the Star's Dawn Culmination (mid-August)

Al-Thurayyā reached its highest point in the sky—nearly overhead for most latitudes of the Arabian Peninsula—during the *galas* of morning twilight in the middle of August. Once again, the poet Dhū al-Rumma (d. 735 CE) connected the dawn culmination of the Star to the time when the herbage was being harvested:

> At the moment when the Star had culminated in the waning morning darkness, when the herbage had ripened for harvest, some bent, and some harvested already.[27]

Here, the poet used the actual term *ghalas*, which the author translated as 'waning morning darkness'. The culmination of the Star during *ghalas* points to a likely timeframe of mid-August for this line of poetry. However, human brains tend to perceive stars near the zenith (directly overhead) as closer together, so al-Thurayyā could have been perceived to be roughly overhead for several weeks before or after mid-August.

In another poem from Dhū al-Rumma, the poet compared the lateral orientation of the asterism to an aquatic bird that was soaring overhead.

> I arrived haphazardly when al-Thurayyā, high overhead, was like an aquatic bird soaring.[28]

In the extended description that follows, the poet also compared the Follower and the V-shaped star cluster surrounding it (called the Hyades today) to a group of camels driven by a camel herder. The Follower was also called the Urger of the Star *(ḥādī al-najm)*, a name that imagined the bright red star to be driving al-Thurayyā ahead of it.[29]

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[27] Ghaylan b. ʿUqba Dhū al-Rumma, *The Diwan of Ghailan ibn ʿUqbah, Known as Dhu ʻr-Rummah*, ed. Carlile Henry Hayes Macartney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919), p.137: *ḥattā idhā mā staqalla n-najmu fī ghalasin wa aḥṣada l-baqlu malwiyyun wa maḥṣudun*.

[28] Dhū al-Rumma, *Diwan*, pp.401–402; Ibn Qutayba 1956, 40; al-Marzūqī 1914, 1:188: *waradtu iʿtisāfan wa th-thurayyā ka-annahā ʿalā qimmati r-raʾsi ibnu māʾi muḥliqun*.

[29] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.38; al-Ṣūfī, *Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib*, p.154; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.1, p.188.

Inspiration at the Star's Cosmical Setting (early November)

The cosmical setting of al-Thurayyā in the west as the Sun was close to rising in the east is the Star's most prevalent apparition referenced in the extant poetry among the six circumstances mentioned above. The aspect of al-Thurayyā as it hangs low in the west before setting is oblique to the horizon for the latitudes of the Arabian Peninsula, with its narrow side at upper left and its broader side at lower right. This visual presentation of the star cluster when it set inspired vivid comparisons in Arabic poetry. The pre-Islamic poet Imruʾ al-Qays (d. 544 CE) imagined the star cluster in this position to be a bejewelled ornamental sash that draped from one's shoulder on one side to the waist on the other side, reflecting precisely the appearance of al-Thurayyā when it set:

> When al-Thurayyā in the sky inclined obliquely like the oblique draping of the folds of a sash beaded with variegated gems.[30]

Because al-Thurayyā has this orientation only when it descends low in the western sky, recalling this orientation alone was enough to indicate that the asterism was setting. Another line of poetry, unattributed by Ibn Qutayba, compared the Star in this orientation to a cluster of grapes:

> And it hung down low as if it were a cluster of grapes.[31]

Similarly, the poet ʿUqba b. Ruʾba (d. late 8th century CE) remarked, 'The Star had sloped down as if it were a cluster of *mulāḥiyy* grapes'.[32] (Grapes of the *mulāḥiyy* variety are long and white.) Another unattributed line imagined that the widening of the star cluster from top to bottom in this position reflected its having passed through a sieve:

> He traveled by night after al-Thurayyā had sunk, after it appeared as if the sinking had separated al-Thurayyā [like] a sieve.[33]

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[30] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.24: *idhā mā th-thurayyā fī samāʾi taʿarraḍa athnāʾi l-washāḥi l-mufaṣṣali*.

[31] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.25: *wa tadallat ka-annahā ʿunqūda*.

[32] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.25: *wa n-najmu qad taṣawwaba ka-annahu ʿunqūda mulāḥī*.

[33] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.25: *sarā baʿdamā ghāra th-thurayyā wa baʿdamā ka-anna th-thurayyā ḥallahu l-ghawaru minkhalu*.

In the Qur'an, Sura 53, called the Sura of the Star *(surat al-najm)*, begins with an oath that referenced the setting of the Star *(al-najm)*:

> 1. By the Star when it goes down—[34]

The setting of stars as mentioned a few times in the Qur'an, including a similar oath in Sura 56, the Sura of the Inevitable *(surat al-wāqiʿa)*:

> 75. Furthermore I call to witness the setting of the Stars—[35]

At some point, al-Thurayyā was anthropomorphized with two hands in the sky that connected to the star cluster. A fainter grouping that was connected to al-Thurayyā through a shorter chain of stars was called the Amputated Hand *(al-kaff al-jadhmāʾ)*, and a well-defined hand with five bright stars that was connected to al-Thurayyā through a longer chain of stars was called the Henna-Dyed Hand *(al-kaff al-khaḍīb)*, likely inspired by a yellowish star that formed part of the hand.[36] (The Amputated Hand was represented by a few stars in the eastern portion of Cetus; the Henna-Dyed Hand was represented by the five bright stars of Cassiopeia.) The stars that marked the Hands of al-Thurayyā *(aydī al-thurayyā)* set roughly together into the western horizon, depending on one's latitude. This happened in early October, about a month before al-Thurayyā itself set. Famed poet Dhū al-Rumma (d. 735 CE) memorialized the setting of the Hands of al-Thurayyā in October:

> Won't Mayy come in the night to one amorously mystified by her mention, when the Hands of al-Thurayyā reach for the western places of sunset?[37]

Here, Dhū al-Rumma longed to see his beloved at the time when the Hands of al-Thurayyā approached closely to the western horizon. The stars that lay at the ends of these hands would have set at very nearly the same time

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[34] ʿAbdullah Yūsuf ʿAlī, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān, New Edition with Revised Translation and Commentary* (Brentwood, MD: Amana Corporation, 1991), p.1377: *wa n-najmi idhā hawā*.

[35] ʿAlī, *Qur'ān,* p.1416: *fa-lā uqsimu bi-mawāqiʿi n-nujūmi*.

[36] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.32; al-Ṣūfī, *Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib*, pp.77, 261; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, pp.378–379.

[37] Dhū al-Rumma, *Diwan*, p.55: *a-lā ṭaraqat mayya hayūman bi-dhikrihā wa aydiyu th-thurayyā junnaḥun fī l-maghāribi*.

in Dhū al-Rumma's day, making their looming position over the western horizon indicative of a relatively narrow timeframe for this hoped-for assignation with his beloved Mayy.

The cosmical setting of al-Thurayyā in the morning twilight skies of early November happened during a period of abundant rain in first millennium Arabia. The rains that fell during the fall were called *wasmī* ('marking') in Arabic because they marked the earth with green after the heat and dryness of the summer. Ibn Qutayba remarked that al-Thurayyā was the best of the stars that defined *wasmī*, because the rains during the setting of al-Thurayyā came when the earth wanted water.[38] He then said that the people would say, 'Surely the rain of al-Thurayyā during the *wasmī* does not combine with the rain of the Forehead in the spring without that year being complete in fertility and abundant in herbage'.[39] The Forehead *(al-jabha)* was an asterism located in modern Leo that marked the beginning of the mane of a very large Arabian constellation called the Lion *(al-asad)*. The rains that fell during the cooler part of the year were so important that 'the Doctor of the Arabs' *(ṭabīb al-ʿarab)* said, 'Guarantee to me what is between the setting of al-Thurayyā and its rising, and I guarantee to you the rest of the year'.[40] As we have already seen, al-Thurayyā rose helically in the morning twilight during mid to late May, so the Doctor has described a period of about half of a year.

Both the period during which seasonal rains fell and the stars that set while the rains fell, and sometimes also the rains themselves, were called in Arabic *naw'*, a term that has a complicated history.[41] In what follows, this term may be translated as 'rain star' or 'rain period', depending on context. Dhū al-Rumma used three different words that meant 'thunder' to emphasize the amount of rain that fell during the *naw'* of al-Thurayyā:

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[38] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.31.

[39] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, pp.31–32: *innahu mā jtamaʿa maṭara th-thurayyā fī l-wasmī wa maṭara l-jabhati fī r-rabīʿi illā kāna dhālika l-ʿāmi tāmma l-khaṣbi kathīra l-kilāʿi*.

[40] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.30: *iḍmanū lī mā bayna suqūṭi th-thurayyā wa ṭulūʿihā aḍmanu lakum sāʾira s-sanati*.

[41] Daniel M. Varisco, 'The Rain Periods in Pre-Islamic Arabia,' *Arabica* 34, no. 2, (1987): pp.251–266.

> Thundering clouds of thunder with clouds of flickering lightning when thundered vehemently the rain period of al-Thurayyā or the Sneeze of the Lion.[42]

The Sneeze of the Lion *(nathrat al-asad)* was another part of the huge Arabian constellation of the Lion, represented by a faint star cluster that today is variably called the Beehive Cluster or Praesepe in Cancer. Two nearby stars were called the Two Nostrils *(al-mankhirān)*, so Arabs saw in the grouping a pair of dim stars that have sneezed out the star cluster, which because of its dimness appears as a fuzzy blotch in the sky.[43] Pairing al-Thurayyā with another part of the Lion, the Two Sky-Raisers *(al-simākān)*, Dhū al-Rumma described widespread downpours of rain:

> There remains upon you both from the rain period of the Sky-Raiser and the rain period of al-Thurayyā a sudden downpour from the clouds that flows widely.[44]

Inspiration at the Star's Acronychal Rising (late October)

The acronychal rising of al-Thurayyā in the east in the waning twilight of dusk after the Sun had set in the west occurred in late October, which was before the cosmical setting of the asterism into the western horizon during the *ghalas* of morning twilight in early November. The reason for this apparent contradiction is that a star is not visible when it is precisely opposite the Sun in the sky (stellar opposition), because the star needs some amount of darkness in the sky to be visible through the glow of twilight. During a cosmical setting, roughly half of the twilight period passes between the setting of the star and the rising of the Sun, and so it occurs after opposition. During an acronychal rising, roughly half of the twilight period must pass after sunset before the star can be visible when it rises, and so it occurs before opposition.

In the earlier section on the heliacal rising of the Star in the morning twilight, the next piece of rhymed prose was presented. The piece with which it was paired, referencing the acronychal rising, follows:

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[42] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.32: *mujaljala r-raʿdi ʿarrāṣā idhā rtajisat nawʾu th-thurayyā bihi aw nathrati l-asadi*.

[43] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.54; al-Ṣūfī, *Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib*, pp.173, 261; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.1, pp.190, 317.

[44] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.32: *wa lā zāla mina nawʾi s-simāki ʿalaykumā wa nawʾi th-thurayyā muthjimun mutabaṭṭiḥu*.

> When rises the Star in a short period of morning twilight, the shepherd earnestly seeks a small waterskin outright.[45]
>
> When rises the Star at nightfall, the shepherd earnestly seeks a shawl.[46]

The two pieces of rhymed prose were often recorded together, but not always. Nevertheless, their common structure is evident. Just as the first piece described what a shepherd needed when the weather was hot—a ready source of water by his side—the second piece described what the shepherd needed when the weather was cool—another layer of clothing.

Another piece of rhymed prose used a different linguistic structure to describe the position of al-Thurayyā relative to the Sun during its acronychal rising in the evening twilight:

> When al-Thurayyā faces the setting sun in the sky's eastern channel, it is a night for offspring and a grown camel.[47]

The Arabic phrase *bi-qabal* indicated that a celestial object was in a tract of the eastern sky near the horizon at sunset, facing the Sun from the opposite part of the sky. This time of year was one of the periods when camels were born.

Inspiration at the Star's Dusk Culmination (late January)

Al-Thurayyā reached its highest point in the sky—nearly overhead for most latitudes of the Arabian Peninsula—during the evening twilight in late January. (As at dawn culmination, humans tend to perceive stars near the zenith as closer together, so al-Thurayyā could have been perceived to be roughly overhead for several weeks before or after late January.) A short piece of rhymed prose described the weather at this time:

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[45] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.29; Ibn Sīda, *Kitāb al-mukhaṣṣaṣ,* v.9, p.15; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.180. With some variations, the Arabic reads: *idhā ṭalaʿa n-najmu ghudayya, ibtaghā r-rāʿī shukayya.*

[46] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.27; Ibn Sīda, *Kitāb al-mukhaṣṣaṣ,* v.9, p.15; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.180. With some variations, the Arabic reads: *idhā ṭalaʿa n-najmu ʿishāʾ, ibtaghā r-rāʿī kisāʾ.*

[47] Quṭrub, *Kitāb al-azmina*, p.29; Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.96; Ibn Sīda, *Kitāb al-mukhaṣṣaṣ,* v.9, p.15; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.180. With some variations, the Arabic reads: *idhā kānati th-thurayyā bi-qabal fa-laylatu nitājin wa jamal.*

> When al-Thurayyā is above the crowns of heads, it is a night for a young man and an adze.[48]

The young man needed an adze at this season in order to chop firewood to keep the fires lit. The Arabic phrase *qimma r-raʾs* meant 'at the crown of the head', or towards the zenith, directly overhead. A longer version of this piece of rhymed prose was also recorded by some authors:

> When al-Thurayyā at nightfall is above crowns of heads, withdraw from the cold into the covers, slaughter the largest of the camels, gnaw and gnaw with your kids, and if you are asked, then frown in the doldrums.[49]

This piece of rhymed prose consists entirely of imperative commands to the listener, which is unique for this genre as it relates to stellar indicators of seasonal change. The scarcity of food in midwinter is reflected in the commands to slaughter the large camel and to gnaw meat to the bone.

The dusk culmination of the Star was also mentioned in poetry, including an interesting line by al-Rāʿī al-Numayrī (d. ca. 715 CE):

> She spent the night reckoning the Star in a bowl full of grease, its stagnancy [made] swift by the hands of the eaters.[50]

The image here is of a woman, whom the poet took in as a guest, looking straight down into her bowl having finished eating. The remaining grease has congealed and whitened, allowing her to see the Star above her head reflected in the undisturbed grease.

A line of poetry by al-Kumayt (d. 743 CE) indicated the overhead position of the Star by describing what people did to observe it:

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[48] Quṭrub, *Kitāb al-azmina*, p.29; Ibn Sīda, *Kitāb al-mukhaṣṣaṣ,* v.9, p.15; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.180. With some variations, the Arabic reads: *idhā kānati th-thurayyā qimma r-raʾs fa-laylatu fatan wa faʾs.*

[49] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.28; Ibn Sīda, *Kitāb al-mukhaṣṣaṣ,* v.9, p.15; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.180. With some variations, the Arabic reads: *idhā amsati th-thurayyā qimma raʾs fa-fī d-dithāri fa-khnis wa-ʿuẓmāhunna fa-ḥdis wa-unhis bi-nayka wa-nhas wa-in suʾilta fa-ʿbis thumma ʿbis.*

[50] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.23: *fa-bātati taʿiddu n-najma fī mustaḥīratin sarīʿun bi-aydī l-ākilīna jumūduhā.*

> You are a son of provisions of the caravan in each winter, its prince and the water-giver when the Star makes one open his mouth.[51]

When people look straight up, their natural inclination is to gape their mouths open, which Ibn Qutayba attributed to the severity of the cold.

The poet al-Qaṭāmī (d. 719/720 CE) described the intensity of the cold during the dusk culmination of al-Thurayyā:

> When the Star reaches the middle of the sky in winter, at a time when the dog grumbles in discomfort and the snow crunches underfoot.[52]

The grumbling of dogs in discomfort due to the severity of the cold was described by an Arabic word exhibiting onomatopoeia: *harra*, a word whose double rolled 'r' sounds mimicked the non-aggressive growling sound of such an uncomfortable dog. This same root was used to designate a pair of stars that rose together in the morning twilight during late November as the Two Grumbling Dogs *(al-harrārān)*.[53]

Inspiration at the Star's Heliacal Setting (early/mid-April)

Finally, the heliacal setting of al-Thurayyā into the western horizon in the evening twilight shortly after the Sun has set occurred in early to mid-April, a time of year when springtime storms brought wind and rain. A final piece of rhymed prose reflected this condition:

> When al-Thurayyā closely follows the setting sun in the sky's western terrain, it is a night for wind and rain.[54]

The Arabic phrase *bi-dabar* indicated that a celestial object was in a tract of the western sky near the horizon at sunset, following the Sun after it had set, its heliacal setting. The three short pieces of rhymed prose that

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[51] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.28: *wa anta ibnu zādi r-rakbi fī kulli shatwatin amīruhu wa s-sāqī idhā n-najmu afgharā*.

[52] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.28: *idhā kabbada n-najmu s-samāʾa bi-shatwatin ʿalā ḥīna harra l-kalbu wa th-thalju khāshifu*.

[53] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.71; al-Ṣūfī, *Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib*, pp.68, 261; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.183.

[54] Quṭrub, *Kitāb al-azmina*, p.29; Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.96; Ibn Sīda, *Kitāb al-mukhaṣṣaṣ,* v.9, p.15; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina*, v.2, p.180. With some variations, the Arabic reads: *idhā kānati th-thurayyā bi-dabar fa-laylatu rīḥin wa-maṭar.*

described the evening apparitions of al-Thurayyā—its acronychal rising, dusk culmination and heliacal setting—together formed a mini calendar centered on this singular celestial object, and these pieces were often recorded together as a set.

A final line of poetry, from Kuthayyir ʿAzza (d. 723 CE), indicated the heliacal setting of al-Thurayyā by mentioning its early evening conjunction with the young crescent Moon:

> Dismiss Suʿdā from you, for the distance only aids the conjunction of al-Thurayyā one time, and then it fades away.[55]

Because the heliacal setting of al-Thurayyā happens when it is low in the west in evening twilight, it met the waxing crescent Moon at this time of year—and only this time of year. In other words, al-Thurayyā had a conjunction with the waxing crescent Moon just once per year, and ins similar fashion the poet advised the two lovers to meet only once per year. After the heliacal setting of al-Thurayyā, the star cluster disappeared from view, while it crossed to the other side of the Sun, until its heliacal rising in the *ghalas* of morning twilight, a period of more than a month.

Discussion

This paper has traced the multivalency of meaning derived from the visual appearance of the star cluster al-Thurayyā, which was celebrated antonomastically as 'the Star'. Memorialized in poetry and rhymed prose, the six different seasonal apparitions of the Star inspired a rich cultural heritage in Arabic literature, from poetic descriptions of its changing aspect as it crossed the sky to self-contained seasonal mini-calendars that were expressed and memorized through rhymed prose. Over time, this asterism was anthropomorphized as the head of two chains of stars that became its two arms and themselves inspired poetic verse. Beyond its own celestial figure, the fame of the Star engendered names and literary descriptions for other stars that were connected to it, such as the brilliant star Aldebaran, the Follower of the Star. The results of this study illuminate how great the breadth and depth of cultural material even a single asterism can inspire.

[55] Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-anwāʾ*, p.29: *fa-daʿ suʿdā innamā tusʿifu n-nawī qarānu th-thurayyā marratan thumma taʾfulu*.