

Rising Star Paradigms

Encoding Seasonal Times in Arabic *Saj'a* Rhymes

العقرب
al-'aqrab

The Scorpion

*idhā ṭala 'ati l-'aqrab
jamasa l-midhnab
wa māta l-jundab
wa qaruba l-ashyab
wa lam yaşirra l-akḥṭab*

When the Scorpion rises,
the valley rivulet freezes,
the locust deceases,
the hoarfrost approaches,
and the rasping shrike ceases.

Heliacal Rising

The annually recurring first observable rising of a star in the east amid the growing light of dawn. Seasonal timing depends on latitude, precession, local horizon lines, atmospheric clarity, and the brightness of the star.

(rose in early November)

(rose in mid-November)

(rose in late November)

(rose in mid-December)

الزباني

az-zubānā

*idhā ṭala 'ati z-zubānā
aḥdathat li-kulli dhī 'iyālin shānā
wa li-kulli dhī māshiyatin hawānā
wa qālū kāna wa kānā
fa-jma ' li-ahlīka wa lā tawānā*

The Pincer

When the Pincer rises,
it creates for each household head
worries
and for each she-camel breeder
ignominies,
and they tell "Once upon a time..."
stories;
so, gather for your kin, and do not
be at ease.

الاکلیل

al-iklīl

*idhā ṭala 'a l-iklīl
hājati l-fuḥūl
wa shummirati dh-dhuḡūl
wa tukhuwwifati s-suyūl*

The Crown

When the Crown rises,
lusty are the male camels,
gathered up are the skirts,
and feared are the torrents.

القلب

al-qalb

*idhā ṭala 'a l-qalb
jā'a sh-shitā'u ka-l-kalb
wa šāra ahlu l-bawādī fī karb
wa lam tumakkini l-faḥla illā dhātu
tharb*

The Heart

When the Heart rises,
like the dog the winter comes,
distressed are the desert-dwellers,
and the male camel has none but
emaciated females with lumps of
fat on their bellies.

الشولة

ash-shawla

*idhā ṭala 'ati sh-shawla
a 'jalati sh-shaykha l-bawla
wa-shtaddat 'alā l-'ā'ili l-'awla
wa qīla shatwatun zawla*

The Raised Tail

When the Raised Tail rises,
the elder the daughter hastens,
family need presses household
heads,
and it is called a wondrous freeze.

Introduction

Arabic rhymed prose—a piece of which is called *saj'a*—is an ancient art form that may have predated classical Arabic poetry. It featured a rhyme at the end of each phrase, but no internal meter, making memorization and oral transmission easy.

Arabs used *saj'a* for orations and secular aphorisms, as well as formulaic Islamic practices. One application facilitated seasonal forecasting by connecting the heliacal rising of a particular star to the weather and its associated floral, faunal or societal activity.

Sources

This research features for the first time original translations into English from Abbasid-era Arabic sources of rhymed prose, including collections from:

- ❖ Qutrub (d. 821 CE), *Kitāb al-Azmina wa Talbiyat al-Jāhiliyya*

- ❖ Ibn Qutayba (d. 889 CE), *Kitāb al-Anwā' (fi mawāsīm al-'Arab)*
- ❖ Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 896 CE), as transmitted by Ibn Sīda in his *Kitāb al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ*
- ❖ al-Marzūqī (d. 1030 CE), *Kitāb al-Azmina wa'l-Amkina*

Results

The translations here are just a sampling of nearly 80 pieces of rhymed prose that referenced 38 specific star groupings. Of them, 70 began with the formulaic opening phrase, "When [x star name] rises..." (*idhā ṭala 'a [x]*). Because the star name appeared

at the end of this phrase, each additional phrase rhymed with the star name. Many pieces of *saj'a* lengthened over time as new phrases were added. This likely occurred organically, as individual authorship was never attributed to these pieces.

Discussion

Inspired by recurring heliacal risings of stars, Arabs adapted the genre of rhymed prose to create memorable maxims that forecasted seasonal changes. The oldest extant *saj'a* collection (of Qutrub) includes pieces for just 23 star groupings; most were

bright enough to be directly observed in the waxing light of dawn. In time, *saj'a* collections grew to incorporate all 28 lunar stations (*manāzil al-qamar*), many of whose heliacal risings were too faint for direct observation at the appropriate time.

Danielle Adams, PhD

Lowell Observatory
1400 W Mars Hill Rd
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
lowell.edu

dadams@lowell.edu

Connect with Danielle:




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