THE RAIN PERIODS IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA

BY

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The pastoral Arab tribesmen of pre-Islamic Arabia interpreted the sequence of seasons according to familiar patterns of climate, availability of water and extent of pasture. Ibn Qutayba, in his tenth century A.D. Kitāb al-Anwā', collected poetry and sayings of the pre-Islamic Arabs in order to describe their weather and star lore. The purpose of this study is to examine the terminology and sequence of rain periods as recorded by Ibn Qutayba and other Arab authors. At least nine different terms were used for rain periods over the course of the year. It appears that the risings and settings of certain stars were observed to mark the timing of the rains. Unfortunately, the available information from the texts is fragmentary and sometimes contradictory. Only with ethnographic descriptions of contemporary Arab groups is it possible to view the perception of rain periods in actual context. Such ethnographic comparison is essential in interpreting the information on pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia.

The Anwā' and Rain Periods

The most important genre on pre-Islamic weather and astronomy is that of the anwā', which represented potential times of rain linked with the risings and settings of certain stars. The text of Ibn Qutayba is the most famous and perhaps the most quoted, but variant traditions survive.


Arabica, Tome xxxiv, 1987
in anwāʾ texts by Abū Ishāq al-Zajjāj² (died 311/923) and Qutrub³ (died 206/821). Most of the known texts have not survived, although earlier authors are quoted extensively in the major lexicons and important discussions of star names by al-Marzūqī⁴ (died 421/1039) and Ibn Sīdā⁵ (died 458/1066). The emphasis of all these texts is on the meaning of star names and terminology rather than the description of seasonal reckoning in specific contexts.

The term nawʾ (plural, anwāʾ) is generally defined as the dawn setting of a star or asterism in the west at the same time as an opposite star rises with the sun in the east. There is some disagreement over whether the nawʾ refers to the setting or the rising⁶. The verbal root clearly indicates a rising (muhūd), but the Arabs are said to have used the opposite meaning of setting (suqūt) for those stars which mark times of rain, wind, heat or cold. This shift in meaning may simply reflect the idea that the concomitant rising and setting were one event in which only the setting star would be visible. While the literature suggests that the setting of the star was the marker for rain, virtually all of the sayings recorded by Ibn Qutayba and others mention only the risings.

Ibn al-Aʿrābī claimed that there could only be a nawʾ when rain occurred⁷. In contemporary Arabic dialects nawʾ often becomes a term for rain or a rain period⁸. In the pre-Islamic poetry cited by Ibn Qutayba the nawʾ is always linked to stars known to mark periods of rain. This sense is also implied in a tradition of the prophet Muhammad, who condemned the pre-Islamic practice of invoking rain from stars rather than from God⁹. Certain idols had been erected at the Kaʾba and were prayed to for rain. In his commentary on sūra 53:19-23, al-Zamahšari¹⁰

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² Several late copies of his text exist. I examined Muṣṭafā Fāḍil miqāṭ 198 (Cairo, Dār al-Kutub).
³ A fragmentary edition was published in Majallat al-Majmaʾ al-ʿIlmi al-ʿArabi (Damascus, 1922), vol. II, pp. 33-46. I have used the more complete copy of H 4822 (Cairo, Dār al-Kutub).
⁵ Al-Muhassas (Beirut, 1965), vol. 9, pp. 9-14.
⁷ Lisān al-ʿArab, n-wʾ.
⁹ Ibn Qutayba, 1956, pp. 13-16.