

## A NOTE ON STAR NAMES, ESPECIALLY ARABIC, AND THEIR LITERATURE

---

*P. Kunitzsch*

Davidstr. 17, 8000 München 81, Federal Republic of Germany

Compared to the countries of German language, it seems that in the Anglo-American world star names are a much more popular topic. This can be gathered not only from the relatively great number of publications, and published lists, of such names, but even more from the several successively published handlists with pronunciations of star names, which obviously indicate that these names are still much used in the English-speaking world.

One of the major sources for the knowledge, and explanation, of star names was since long the voluminous book by Richard Hinckley Allen: *Star-Names and Their Meanings*, New York, etc., 1899, and which recently was reprinted by the Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1963, under the slightly modified title: *Star Names. Their Lore and Meaning*.

So some words should occasionally be given on the value and reliability of Allen's book. It seems Allen did not carry out investigations of his own into the field of star names. Moreover he compiled the book from all sorts of (secondary) sources available up to his time, and informations on the celestial nomenclatures of different peoples and civilizations. Regarding Arabic star names, the last author before Allen, who had given detailed and source-bound informations on the names, their history, derivations and meanings, was Ludwig Ideler in his book *Untersuchungen über den Ursprung und die Bedeutung der Sternnamen*, Berlin, 1809. In the following 90 years, as it seems, no further progress in this field was made. So Allen could not but repeat the informations given by Ideler on ancient and Arabic stellar nomenclature and by others on the celestial nomenclatures of other civilizations. His book may be taken as a handbook summing up the state of knowledge arrived at by his time.

As far as the Arabic matter is concerned, his book suffers from three major drawbacks, linguistic and historical. First, Allen had no own knowledge of Arabic. He could rely, for parts of his book, on the help of Professor R.J.H. Gottheil in this matter<sup>1</sup> but this did not save the book from innumerable mistakes in the Arabic names. These mistakes belong to simple grammar<sup>2</sup> as well as to the transliteration of the Arabic words<sup>3</sup>. Second, he introduced, indiscriminately, all the Arabic terms he could gather in his sources, without differentiation as to whether such terms were really used in Arabic texts, or merely conjectured by western authors. Third, in identifying the 'Arabic star names' in western, Latin, use he blindly followed

his predecessors and thus passed on a great number of erroneous identifications which those had not been able correctly to establish due to the lack of original source material in their times<sup>4</sup>. So, with regard to the Arabic matter, Allen's book was, and still is, of rather restricted value.

A careful comparison of a selected series of pages containing characteristical mistakes and misprints, in both editions of the book<sup>5</sup>, shows that the wording is completely identical in both editions<sup>6</sup>, which means that the 1963 edition does not show any progress in the given informations as against the first print of 1899, of which it is a straight reprint.

As Arabic stellar nomenclature, and its western derivations, have been the subject of a series of critical studies and analyses in recent years, so, for the benefit of all those interested in this domain, it might be worth while naming once more the most important of the respective references (which are all written in the German language): Western adaptations of Arabic star names have been studied by P.Kunitzsch: '*Arabische Sternnamen in Europa*', Wiesbaden, 1959. The indigenous Arabic stellar nomenclature was displayed by the same author: '*Untersuchungen zur Sternnomenklatur der Araber*', Wiesbaden, 1961. For the classification of 'Arabic star names' and the stellar nomenclature of the Arabs see also a paper by P.Kunitzsch: 'Arabische Sternnamen – Sternnamen der Araber. Zur Begriffsbestimmung', in *Sudhoffs Archiv* 61 (1977), pp. 105–117. The Ptolemaic stellar nomenclature and terminology, in the Greek-Arabic-Latin tradition, was lately analysed and edited from all available Arabic versions and Gerard of Cremona's Latin translation, again by the same author: *Der Almagest. Die Syntaxis Mathematica des Claudius Ptolemäus in arabisch-lateinischer Überlieferung*, Wiesbaden, 1974 (especially pp. 172–212 for the 48 Ptolemaic constellations, and pp. 217–370 for individual stars).

#### NOTES

1. Cf. Allen's own words in the introduction, p. xii of the Dover edition.

2. Up to p. 265 (constellation of Lepus) he usually gives wrong genitive constructions, of the type *Al Kursiyy al Jabbār*, or *Al 'Arsh al Jauzah*, instead of the correct *Kursiyy al Jabbār*, or '*Arsh al Jauzā*' (p. 265). In the later part of the book, and in the 'Arabic Index' (pp. 537–547) this sort of grammatical mistake has disappeared.

3. This means that in many cases the diacritical marks in the Arabic words are not correctly put in, or are missed out. (So *Jauzah*, above in note 2, should correctly be spelt *Jauzā*.) This sort of mistake was mostly retained in the Arabic Index at the end of the book.

4. For an example comprising all three sorts of mistakes, see p. 197 where it is stated that the western name *Azelfafage* for  $\pi^1$  Cygni is probably ultimately derived from Arabic *Al Thilf al Faras* ('the Horse's Foot or Track'). In this, the first *Al* is grammatically wrong and should be omitted; second, *Thilf* should correctly be spelt *Thilf* (in Allen's system, = *zif* in modern transliteration). Third, the whole expression never occurred in any Arabic source; the true origin of *Azelfafage*, moreover, is the Arabic term *al-sulahfāh* ('the tortoise'), one of several alternative Arabic designations for the Ptolemaic constellation of Lyra. Hermannus Dalmata, the mediaeval Latin translator of the ultimate source, Abū Ma'shar's *Introductorium maius*, misinterpreted Lyra, in this place, as '*cignus*', and this caused the error of Johann Bayer who picked up the name *Azelfage* from Abū Ma'shar and, in his *Uranometria* of 1603, attributed it to some stars in the constellation of Cygnus. (In Allen's Arabic Index, p. 546, the spelling appears in a corrected form as *Thilf al Faras*.)

5. I am glad to express my thanks to Dr D.W.Dewhirst, Chairman of the Library Committee of the Royal Astronomical Society, for supplying me with Xerox-copies of the specimen pages which I had selected for examination. Copies of the 1899 edition seem to have become very rare in European public libraries, as, for several years, I was not able to obtain such a copy, not even through the international book loan service.

6. Some minor changes refer to the pagination of the 'Introduction' (1963: v-xiv, against 1899: xi-xx. In the list of authors, pp. 555 ff., however, the old numbering has been left unchanged!), and on the verso of p. 563 the author's 'Envoi' has been omitted.