











coins (*dīnār*) being weighed on a scale [to certify their value]. The money-changer (*ṣayrafī*) carefully balances the scale, but because one cheek weighs less than the other the money-changer has to add a carat (*qīrāt*)—the mole itself—to the cheek that weighs less so that they balance.<sup>19</sup> The next poem in the sequence departs from the speck motif to introduce a simile with political significance.<sup>20</sup> The anonymous poem announces that “a successor (*khalīfah*, caliph) to Joseph in beauty has appeared.” The reader will recall that the figure of Joseph became a by-word for beauty in the Arabic tradition. This successor to Joseph’s beauty is nevertheless more daunting than the prophet as depicted in the Bible and Quran: “When he appears both worlds shudder.” In the second line of the poem, the beloved is compared to the caliph. The poet says to his companion, “Stop with me and look at him so that you may see / the black flag of the caliphate (*‘alam al-khilāfah*) on his cheek.” This comparison between the mole and the caliph’s black flag is the simile that underpins the entire poem, and also links the idea of religious and political succession to aesthetic succession.<sup>21</sup> The beloved is so beautiful that he is reckoned to be in the line of succession from Joseph, but the introduction of the figure of the caliph introduces a whole layer of complexity to this brief poem that is worth unpacking. Two significant layers of meaning were added to the institution of the caliphate during and after the Abbasid revolution. The Abbasids overthrew the Umayyad dynasty in a revolution that was, theoretically, motivated by a strong desire among the Abbasids, their supporters, and their Alid comrades-in-arms to rectify the succession of the caliphate, which had become a hereditary dynasty of the Umayyads. The Umayyads, unlike the family of al-‘Abbās, were not related Hashemites (*banū Hāshim*) and this was used to great effect to bolster support for the Abbasids among proto-Shī‘ites.<sup>22</sup> Succession (*khilāfah*) is thus not merely dynastic succession, but also familial succession from the Prophet, and it is this complex metaphor that is correlated to the idea of the beloved inheriting his beauty from Joseph. Similarly, the Abbasids were known for having constructed an awe-inspiring, fearsome image of the caliph and his imperial strength. The black standard of the Abbasid armies and the caliph’s black robes

---

E. Ashtor). Cf. the epigram by Burhān al-Dīn al-Qīrātī (d. 1379) given in Ibn al-‘Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab fī Akhbār Man Dhahab* (Cairo, 1350–51/1931–32), 6:270, and *passim*.

<sup>19</sup> Geert Jan van Gelder kindly suggested “*fa-ḥtātā*” be read for “*wa-ḥtātā*” at the end of line 1 here.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 2:81.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *EI2*, s.v. “‘Alam” (by J. David-Weill).

<sup>22</sup> The history of the Abbasid revolution is a very vexed issue and much has been written on the subject. My discussion is limited to the popular conception of this revolution and the ethos of the Abbasid caliphate as represented in pre-modern Arabic culture and should not therefore be confused with a historical account. For an introduction to historical and historiographical discussions of this most significant event in early Islamic history, see *EI3*, s.v. “‘Abbāsīd Revolution” (by Elton L. Daniel), *EI2*, s.v. “‘Abbāsīds” (by B. Lewis).

came to symbolize incontestable military and religious authority as an emblem of the Abbasid uprising and subsequent caliphal dynasty but it drew on another common eschatological motif. In the hadith literature, the Prophet Muḥammad explains the signs of the apocalypse thus:

When we were with the prophet, young men from Banū Hāshim [the prophet's kin] entered and when the prophet saw them his eyes filled with tears and his color turned ... so I [ʿAbd Allāh, the narrator] said, “We still see something in your face that we fear,” and [the prophet] said, “We are the people of a house for whom God has chosen the afterlife over this life, and after me, the people of my house will face trials, expulsion, and persecution. Until a people come from the East with *black banners* [emphasis mine, *rāyāt sūd*] and they will ask for charity and will not be given it and so they will fight and will be made victorious and then they will be given what they had asked for, but they will not accept it until they bring it to a man from the people of my house and they will fill it with justice as they had filled it up with injustice, and let him among you who realizes this go to them, even if it is as hopeless as crawling on ice (*ḥabwan ʿalā al-thalj*).”<sup>23</sup>

Against this historical background, we can see that the poet's comparison of the mole on the beloved's cheek to the black caliphal standard and its awesome cultural resonance is a light-hearted way of elevating the description of the beloved beyond the trope that he is Joseph's successor in beauty. The beloved is Joseph's successor (*khalīfah*), but he is also linked to the figure of the tremendous, awe-inspiring emperor-caliph (lit. successor). The mark of his beauty (the mole on his cheek) is, for the one who is infatuated with him, as terrifying as the black standard of the caliph's armies.

The poem that follows on from this one is linked to the caliphal motif by an expression contained in its last line—the line that usually carries the most weight and serves as a climax in these epigrammatic poems. With the image of the fearsome caliph still fresh in the reader's mind, she then encounters a poem that at first does not seem to be correlated with the one immediately preceding it. Yet it is in the last line of this poem that we find a reference to the same cultural nexus of caliphal mystique that links these two poems in a series. The paradoxical ex-

---

<sup>23</sup> *Sunan Ibn Mājah* in *Mawsūʿat al-Ḥadīth al-Sharīf*, ed. Ṣāliḥ ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Muḥammad ʿĀl al-Shaykh (Riyadh, 1999) no. 4082, p. 2725; also in *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, ed. Muḥammad Fuʿād ʿAbd al-Bāqī (Cairo, 1952–54), no. 4082, 2:1366.

pression that concludes the poem is made doubly poignant when read against the historical background of another system of caliphal imagery:<sup>24</sup>

[من السريع]

|                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| فَحُبُّهُ الْمَشْهُورُ مِنْ مَذْهَبِي<br>مِنْ عَنَبٍ فِي خَدِّهِ الْمَذْهَبِ<br>طُلُوعُهُ شَمْسًا مِنَ الْمَغْرَبِ | كَمْ قُلْتُ لِلنَّفْسِ إِلَيْهِ أَذْهَبِي<br>مُهْفَهْفُ الْقَدِّ لَهُ شَامَةٌ<br>أَيْسَنِي التَّوْبَةَ مِنْ حُبِّهِ |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

*kam qultu li-n-nafsi ilayhi –dh’habī / fa-hubbuhu l-mashhūru min madhhabī  
muhafhafu l-qaddi lahū shāmatun / min ‘anbarin fī khaddihi l-mudhhabī  
āyasanī t-tawbata min ḥubbihī / ṭulū‘uhū shamsan mina l-maghrībī*

I’ve often told my soul, “Go after him!  
Loving him is the path (or doctrine) I’m known for.”  
Slender bodied, with a spot  
of ambergris on his gilded cheek.  
I was made to despair of repentance from his love  
when he rose as a sun in the west.

Once again, in this poem the mole on the beloved’s cheek is compared to ambergris, thus connecting this poem to the mole motif shared with other poems in this chapter. Yet we should not overlook the image that ends the poem: a sun rising in the west. Those familiar with the traditional lore associated with the Fatimid dynasty will have noticed the connection between this poem and the caliphal poem that precedes it. It is easy to see that this concluding image refers to the Ismaili belief that the Fatimid leader al-Mahdī billāh rose like a sun in the west in accordance with prophetic hadith.<sup>25</sup>

The image of the sun rising in the west is one of the signs of the apocalypse and is well-known from the hadith literature.<sup>26</sup> In the Sunni hadith collection of Ibn Mājah (d. 273/886), there is a chapter “On the rising of the sun in the West” in the section on “Trials and tribulations” (*fitan*).<sup>27</sup> Here Ibn Mājah relates three reports (*aḥādīth*, sing. *ḥadīth*) relating to this apocalyptic sign. The Prophet is recorded as saying “The hour [i.e., the end of time] will not come until the sun rises in the West” and “The first sign of the resurrection (*khurūjan*) is the rising of

<sup>24</sup> Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 2:81.

<sup>25</sup> See, *inter alia*, W. Ivanov, *Ismaili Tradition Concerning the Rise of the Fatimids* (London, 1942), 238.

<sup>26</sup> See, *inter alia*, Ibn Kathīr, *Nihāyat al-Bidāyah wa-al-Nihāyah fī al-Fitan wa-al-Malāḥim*, ed. Muḥammad Fahīm ‘Abīyah (Riyadh, 1968), 1:195 ff. On Islamic eschatological traditions, see *EL2*, s.v. “al-Sā‘a. 2. In eschatology” (by U. Rubin).

<sup>27</sup> *Sunan Ibn Mājah in Mawsū‘at al-Ḥadīth al-Sharīf*, no. 4070, p. 2722.



the sun in the West.” Another harbinger of the end times, of course, is the reappearance of al-Mahdī.<sup>28</sup> Line two of this poem is also connected to another piece of Fatimid lore: the man with the birthmark (*ṣāhib al-shāmah*). One of the most famous and successful of the Fatimid commanders was al-Ḥusayn ibn Zakarōye, the son of a Fatimid *dāʿī*.<sup>29</sup> He had a birthmark on his face, which he claimed was a heavenly sign (*āyah*), and for this reason was known as *ṣāhib al-shāmah*.<sup>30</sup> Line two would not necessarily put one in mind of him, but the Fatimid imagery in line three makes the allusion clear and demonstrates the extent to which these epigrams drew on a wide body of shared cultural knowledge. This interpretation of two poems of a total of five lines may seem overlong, but by demonstrating that these poems deal with more than just the birthmark topos and eroticism, and that anthologists arranged these poems in their collections conscientiously—if subtly—we can begin to understand how these poetry collections operated as literary texts; something more than neutral compilations.

The next poem in the sequence builds on the sun motif introduced in the preceding poem. In this poem, the poet describes a slender youth, through whose [dark] hair and [gleaming] brow people arrive at both darkness (*ẓulmah*) and light (*diyāʾ*).<sup>31</sup> “Don’t be surprised,” he says, ending the poem, “by the mole on his cheek / for every anemone has its black spot.” In the next poem, this black spot is morphed into a burnt spot:<sup>32</sup> “When my eye saw the fire of his cheek / my heart rushed toward it like a moth [to a flame]<sup>33</sup> // that was burnt by [the fire] and thus became a mole / Just look at the trace of smoke around the edges (*al-ḥawāshī*).” The last image, the edges (*al-ḥawāshī*), can also be read as a reference to the beloved’s incipient beard. In the next poem, the simile foregoes the image of fire, but retains the image of flight, as with the moth in the preceding poem. The poet says that a mole appeared upon the beloved’s cheek, adorning him [or the cheek], and this increased the lover-narrator’s existing passion.<sup>34</sup> “The mole,” he says, “is as though it were the beloved [also “grain,” *ḥabbah*] of my heart, which flew up

<sup>28</sup> See *EI2*, s.v. “al-Mahdi” (by W. Madelung).

<sup>29</sup> See Heinz Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi: The Rise of the Fatimids*, trans. Michael Bonner (Leiden, 1996), 79–88.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 2:81.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Muḥammad Mansour Abaḥsain, “The Supra-Symbolic Moth in Arabic Religious Poetry from the Late Ottoman Period,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 24, no. 1 (1993): 21–27; this poem is translated on p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 2:82.

when it saw him, and so I told it to stop on his cheek.” The figure of the heart leads to the next poem, which is all about the interaction between heart, mole, and eye.<sup>35</sup>

[من المحدث]

|                                  |                               |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| صَحِيحٌ قَلْبِي مَرِيضًا         | خِيْلَانُ خَدِّكَ رَدَّتْ     |
| مَا زِلْنَا فِي الْقَلْبِ بِيضًا | فِي الْعَيْنِ سَوْدٌ وَلَكِنْ |

*khilānu khaddika raddat / ṣaḥīḥa qalbī marīdā*  
*fī l-ayni sūdun wa-lākin / mā zilna fī l-qalbi bīdā*

The birthmarks on your cheek returned  
My healthy heart diseased.  
To the eye they're black, but,  
in my heart, they're forever white.

Thus the beloved (also grain) of the heart motif in the previous poem has here been altered to create the image of the lover's diseased heart. This diseased heart then provides the occasion for the punchline of the poem in which the rational eye, which recognizes the birthmarks as harmful to the lover, is juxtaposed with the passionate heart, which still retains affection for the thing that has caused it pain. What had been expressed through chromatic synecdoche—white for good, black for bad—becomes explicit in the poem that follows. In this poem, the poet says the beloved's cheek is a mirror of all good things and that its beauty makes all facial features [or qualities, more generally] beautiful.<sup>36</sup> “Why then,” he asks in the concluding line, “do I see stars upon it / which are shy even though they are shooting stars (*nayyirāt*)?” Here again it is the concluding image, the shooting star, that provides the link between this poem and the next.

The next poem is interesting not only because of the way it is linked to the poem preceding it, but for the system of metaphors it puts forth.<sup>37</sup>

[من السريع]

|                                       |                                     |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| طَائِفَةٌ يَا كَعْبَةَ الْحُسْنِ      | حَجَّتْ إِلَى وَجْهِكَ أَبْصَارُنَا |
| كَالْحَجَرِ الْأَسْوَدِ فِي الرَّكْنِ | تَمْسُحُ خَالًا مِنْكَ فِي وَجْنَةٍ |

*ḥajjat ilá wajhika abṣārunā / tā'ifatan yā ka'bata l-ḥusnī*  
*tamsaḥu khālan minka fī wajnatin / ka-l-ḥajari l-aswadi fī r-rukni*

Our gaze makes pilgrimage to your face,

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 82.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 82.

O Ka'bah of beauty, and circumambulates,  
 Rubbing the birthmark on your cheek  
 as if it were the black stone in the corner.<sup>38</sup>

Let us understand how this poem is connected to the one before it by elucidating the poem's system of imagery. The gaze of the admirers is likened to pilgrims making the pilgrimage to Mecca, and like these same pilgrims the gaze is said to be circumambulating. Yet rather than say that the gaze is circumambulating the Ka'bah by use of a direct object, the poet employs apostrophe, "O Ka'bah of beauty," to draw maximum attention to the beloved, who is, of course, the idol around which the gaze is performing the ritual circumambulation (*tawāf*).<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the gaze is said to be brushing against the birthmark on the beloved's cheek just as human pilgrims rub their hands against the black stone embedded in a corner of the Ka'bah.<sup>40</sup> This tactile gaze seeks the beloved out with all the intensity of a religious experience. That pilgrims often also kissed the stone only increases the delicacy of the comparison between religious talisman and the beloved's adorned cheek.<sup>41</sup> The reader familiar with the tropes associated with the naevi topos could probably foresee the reference to the black stone, and would certainly have understood the allusion to the shooting stars of the preceding line; in the Islamic tradition one of the popular explanations for the provenance of the black stone (*al-ḥajar al-aswad*) was that it was something akin to a meteorite.<sup>42</sup> The traditional account of the history of the black stone is as follows: when Ibrāhīm (Abraham) was building the Ka'bah with his son Ismā'īl (Ishmael) after the aborted sacrifice, the angel Jibrīl (Gabriel) brought them the black stone, which had been stored in Abū Qubays, "the sacred mountain ... overlooking the Great Mosque [i.e., the site of the Ka'bah] in Mecca," for safekeeping during the flood. Ibrāhīm and his son then built the stone into a corner (*rukṅ*) of the Ka'bah structure.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York, 1982), 73 (cited in Abaḥsain, "The Supra-Symbolic Moth," 22 n). For a further example of the use of the beauty-mark as a description of a pleasing architectural feature, see Gülrü Necipoglu, "The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest: 'Abd al-Malik's Grand Narrative and Sultan Süleyman's Glosses," *Muqarnas* 25 (2008): 30 (with thanks to Stefan Tarnowski for the reference).

<sup>39</sup> See *EI2*, s.v. "Ṭawāf" (by F. Buhl).

<sup>40</sup> See *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, s.v. "Ka'ba" (by G. R. Hawting); *EI2*, s.v. "Ka'ba" (by A. J. Wensinck, rev. J. Jomier). Cf. the concept of the "Gaze," its permutations (from Lacan, Foucault, Mulvey, etc.), and debates surrounding it (e.g., Edward Snow, "Theorizing the Male Gaze: Some Problems," *Representations* 25 [Winter 1989]: 30–41).

<sup>41</sup> On kissing, touching, and prostrating toward the black stone, see Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Azraqī, *Kitāb Akhbār Makkah*, Ser. Die Chroniken der Stadt Mekka, Bd. 1 (Leipzig, 1858), 233–35.

<sup>42</sup> See *ibid.*, 218–24, 225–33.

<sup>43</sup> *EI2*, s.v. "Abū Qubays" (by U. Rubin); cf. *ibid.*, s.v. "Ka'ba" (by A. J. Wensinck, rev. J. Jomier).

The next poem in the sequence is linked to the poem preceding it but one, thereby creating a retrospective thematic loop that sets the three poems off as a subset. Let us examine how this sequence progresses. The three-line poem by al-As‘ad ibn Balīṭah (d. 440/1048) begins by comparing the effect of the beloved’s beauty to the intoxicating effects of wine: “Drunk after seeing him though I don’t know / if it was because of his good looks or the wine?”<sup>44</sup> In the last line of the poem, the naevi topos is taken up and here it is said that the birthmarks on the beloved’s cheek are like “hours of separation on a night of coming together (*wiṣāl*).” This theme of union, or coming together (*wiṣāl*), which is often a metaphor for sex (also spiritual union), serves as the punning core of the first line of the next poem, the first of two naevi poems on a female beloved:<sup>45</sup>

[من البسيط]

|                                                |                                             |     |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----|
| لِمُسْتَهَامٍ بِهَا لِلْوَصْلِ مُنْتَظِرٍ      | فَدَيْتُ زَائِرَةً فِي الْعِيدِ وَاصِلَةً   | [١] |
| وَالْخَالُ فِي صَحْنِهِ يُعْنِي عَنِ الْحَجَرِ | فَلَمْ يَزَلْ خَدُّهَا رُكْنًا أَلُوذُ بِهِ | [٢] |

*fadaytu zā‘iratan fī l-‘īdi wāṣilatan*  
*li-mustahāmin bi-hā li-l-waṣli muntazirī*

1. I’d give my life for a visitor, come on the feast day to see  
An adorer who longs for her arrival [or union with her, or sex]

The second line of the poem reintroduces the pilgrimage motif of the last poem but one; a motif foreshadowed by the use of the word visitor (*zā‘irah*) in the first line.

*fa-lam yazal khadduhā ruknan alūdhu bi-hī*  
*wa-l-khālu fī ṣaḥnihi yughnī ‘ani l-ḥajarī*

2. Her cheek remains the corner I seek shelter in  
And the birthmark on its surface obviates the need for any stone!

This last line makes several direct allusions to the *ḥajj* (pilgrimage) ritual that demonstrate the extent to which, by manipulating situational terminology (a device called *tarjih*), Arab poets were able to eroticize otherwise non-erotic references. When we take account of all the *ḥajj* allusions, the reading of the line changes dramatically:

<sup>44</sup> Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 2:82.

<sup>45</sup> Poem by Kushājim (d. ca. 350/961), al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 2:83.

Her cheek is the corner of the *Kaʿbah* (*rukn*) where I seek shelter / and the birthmark in the courtyard [i.e., of the mosque] (*ṣaḥn*) obviates the need for the *Black Stone* (*al-ḥajar*).

The final poem in the sequence of *naevi* poems in this chapter of al-Nuwayrī's encyclopedia is similarly linked to the one preceding it both by grammatical femininity as well as a common semantic cluster. Where the previous two poems were linked by words sharing the root *w-ṣ-l*, this final poem is linked to the one immediately preceding by the root *n-z-r*. Where the lover of the previous poem was waiting (*muntazir*), hopeful for union with the beloved, in this poem, the same root is used to generate two words having to do with sight: *nāzir* (looker) and *manẓar* (view; sight).

[من الطويل]

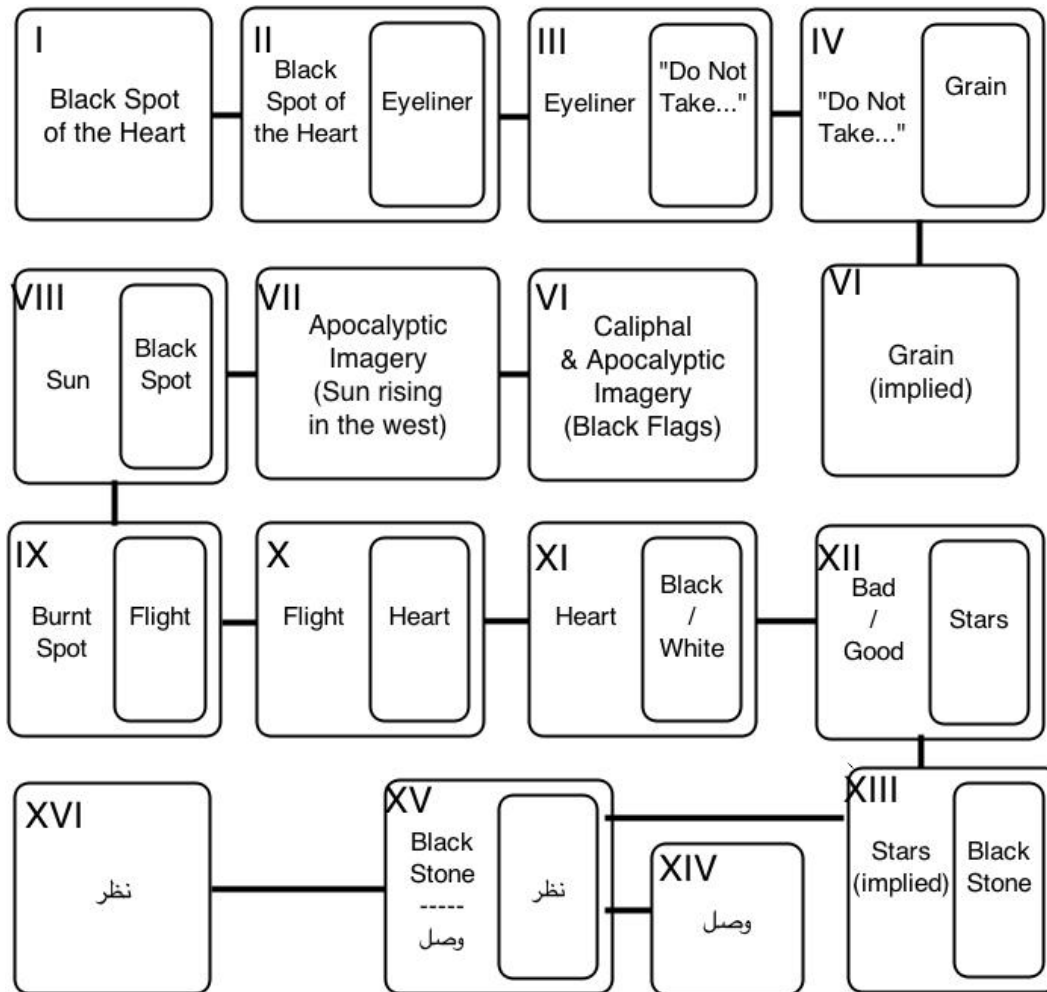
وَمَحْجُوبَةٌ فِي الْخُدْرِ عَنْ كُلِّ نَازِرٍ [١]  
وَلَوْ بَرَزَتْ مَا ضَلَّ بِاللَّيْلِ مَنْ يَسْرِي  
بِحَالِ بَدَاكَ الْخُدَّ أَحْسَنَ مَنْظَرًا [٢]  
مِنَ النَّقْطَةِ السَّوْدَاءِ فِي وَضْحِ الْبَدْرِ

*wa-maḥjūbatin fī l-khidri ʿan kulli nāzirin*  
*wa-law barazat mā ḍalla bi-l-layli man yasrī*  
*bi-khālin bi-dhāka l-khaddi aḥsana manẓaran*  
*mina n-nuqṭati s-sawdāʾi fī waḍaḥi l-badrī*<sup>46</sup>

Protected from a peeper's gaze, this woman in the women's quarters;  
If she were to appear, no night-traveler would go astray,  
With a birthmark on her cheek, that is a more beautiful sight  
Than even the black spot on the brightness of the full moon.

This poem takes up common tropes: the beloved's face, gleaming like the moon, illuminates the darkness and the mole on her cheek is compared to the spot on the moon's surface, some of which we have seen employed in other poems in this chapter. What is most interesting about this poem and the entire sequence of *naevi* poems in this chapter is the way in which the author—the anthologist—strings these poems together. They are not simply a random assortment of poems on a single topic.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 2:83. The poem is by al-ʿAbbās ibn al-Aḥnaf (d. ca. 192/808); see also in *Al-Muḥibb wa-al-Maḥbūb*, 1:59 (discussed below) and in the poet's *Dīwān* (ed. Karam Bustānī [Beirut, 1385/1965], 161), where these lines are presented as vss. 3 and 5 of a six-line poem.



This diagram represents the variation underlining a series of transitions in al-Nuwayrī's short chapter on naevi verses

Of course, these poems are indeed poems on the common topic of naevi, or else they would not have been included in this chapter at all, but the virtuosity implicit in al-Nuwayrī's anthology is the way in which he (or some other as yet unidentified anthologist from whom he borrowed) orchestrates his collection so that the poems follow on from one another in a sequence that takes the reader from one poem to the next.<sup>47</sup> In an article investigating "... what relations a prac-

<sup>47</sup> In the introduction to Book Two of his anthology *Kitāb al-Muḥibb wa-al-Maḥbūb wa-al-Mashmūm wa-al-Mashrūb*, al-Sarī al-Raffā' says that this book consists of short poems (*muqatta'āt al-shi'r*) about the state of lovers ... interwoven [*mutadākhilan ba'duhā fī ba'd*]. He adds that he did not di-



ticed medieval reader noticed between parts of a text,” Andras Hamori ponders a difficult question that we may never be able to answer with any certainty: “[t]he modern reader is more or less trained to react to such patterns in a text, but the rhetoric books do not tell us whether the medieval reader observed them.”<sup>48</sup> One cannot know whether the medieval reader detected the patterns of arrangement in al-Nuwayrī’s chapter—a mini-anthology—which I have sketched here in detail; Hamori is right that the sources are silent about this. One could even imagine that al-Nuwayrī did not himself realize that he was creating a structured, thematically cascading arrangement of poems in his chapter on naevi descriptions. But because this technique is employed by other authors, as we will see below, and because it stands to reason that “practiced medieval reader[s]” were infinitely more sensitive to and aware of patterns of arrangement and intertextuality, I do not think it likely that this is a case of arrangement by accident, or coincidence. Whether every reader detected this pattern is a matter for debate, but it is clearly discernible with only a modicum of concentrated attention and I personally doubt that it went unnoticed by the audience of its day. The question is not whether medieval readers were sufficiently aware of, or properly trained to look for, patterns in poetic arrangements. The question is—having posited, as an axiom of anthological reading, that these poetry collections were not simply collected but were chosen with discretion, arranged with a literary eye, and presented to a literate and sensitive audience—whether any reader could overlook a pattern so obvious.

In al-Sarī al-Raffā’s (d. ca. 972) *Kitāb al-Muḥibb wa-al-Maḥbūb wa-al-Mashmūm wa-al-Mashrūb*, the anthologist includes a chapter on naevi in the first book of four, the “Book of the Beloved” (*kitāb al-maḥbūb*). Though three of the poems in this chapter (nos. 2, 8, and 9) are included in al-Nuwayrī’s chapter of some three and a half centuries later, we cannot detect the same degree of orchestrated arrangement in al-Sarī al-Raffā’s collection of eleven naevi poems. This should not be taken to mean, however, that al-Sarī al-Raffā’ compiled his collection without any artistic vision or that he did not find occasion to employ variation in his arrangement. The anthologist presents eleven epigrammatic poems—note that, as in al-Nuwayrī’s chapter, none of the poems (as cited) is longer than four lines—on the naevi motif, detailing variations in descriptive (ekphrastic) representations (*wasf*) of this hallmark of beauty. The first four poems in this chapter are not arranged by means of the same technique used by al-Nuwayrī, but they do form a

---

vide this book into chapters because the object of this section is selection (or choice: *al-mukhtār*) and that dividing things into chapters requires one to include material of lesser quality so as to bulk up the size. Al-Sarī al-Raffā’, *Kitāb al-Muḥibb wa-al-Maḥbūb wa-al-Mashmūm wa-al-Mashrūb*, ed. Miṣbāḥ Ghalāwanjī and Mājid Ḥasan al-Dhahabī (Damascus, 1986), 2:3.

<sup>48</sup> Andras Hamori, “Some Schemes of Reading in al-Marzūqī, al-Iskāfī and Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” in *Studies in Medieval Arabic and Hebrew Poetics*, 20.

set. The set is made up of two poems of one line (poems 1 and 3) alternating with two poems of three and two lines describing women with birthmarks. The one-line poems, the first alternating subset, both hinge on the image of the beloved's ivory white cheek:

[Poem 1]<sup>49</sup>

A birthmark like a speck (*nuqṭah*) of copperas (*zāj*)  
on a sheet of ivory.<sup>50</sup>

[Poem 3]<sup>51</sup>

A birthmark as though it were a speck (*nuqṭah*) of musk  
shining against the whiteness of ivory.

These poems are very similar in their imagery, with the substitution of a speck of musk for a speck of copperas in the second of the subset. The figure of the speck is recapitulated in the poem that comes between these two one-liners: the second poem in al-Sarī al-Raffā's chapter, which is an extended version of the last poem included in al-Nuwayrī's chapter discussed above. The reader will recall that in this poem the birthmark on the beloved's cheek is said to be prettier than the sight of the black spot on the brightness of the full moon; the word for "spot" in this intercalary poem is the same as that translated as "speck" (*nuqṭah*) in the poems on either side of it (Poems 1 and 3). The last poem in this set of four, in turn, skips the imagery of the poem that immediately precedes it (Poem 3) to revive the celestial motif from Poem 2:

[من الطويل]

خَرَجْنَ خُرُوجَ الْأَنْجُمِ الزُّهْرِ فَالتَقَى  
عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْهُنَّ الْمَلَا حَةُ وَالشَّكْلُ  
وَحَالَ كَحَالِ الْبَدْرِ فِي وَجْهِ مِثْلِهِ  
لَقِينَا الْمُنَى فِيهِ فَحَاجَزْنَا الْبَدْلُ

*kharajna khurūja l-anjumi z-zuhri fa-ltaqá*

<sup>49</sup> Poem by Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kūfī (al-Sarī al-Raffā', *Kitāb al-Muḥibb wa-al-Maḥbūb*, 1:59).

<sup>50</sup> Copperas is also known as green vitriol or iron sulphate. "1. A name given from early times to the protosulphates of copper, iron, and zinc (distinguished as blue, green, and white copperas respectively) ..., used in dyeing, tanning, and making ink." *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "copperas." See also Martin Levey, *Mediaeval Arabic Bookmaking and Its Relation to Early Chemistry and Pharmacology*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, n.s., vol. 52, pt. 4 (Philadelphia, 1962), 16 n. See also in Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes*, where he explains that *al-zāj al-ʿIrāqī* (Iraqi *zāj*) and *zāj al-asākifāh* (cobblers' [?] *zāj*) mean "yellow vitriol" or colcothar (Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes* [Leiden, 1881; repr. Beirut, 1991], s.v. "z-w-j.")

<sup>51</sup> Poem by 'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Ḥārithī (al-Sarī al-Raffā', *Kitāb al-Muḥibb wa-al-Maḥbūb*, 1:60). On this poet see Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shu'arā'*, facsimile edition, ed. Abbas Eghbal (Cambridge, 1939, 130–32); *ibid.*, ed. 'Abd al-Sattār Aḥmad Farrāj (Cairo, 1956), 276–80.



‘alayhinna minhunna l-malāḥatu wa-sh-shiklū  
 wa-khālun ka-khāli l-badri fī wajhi mithlihī  
 laqīnā l-muná fihī fa-ḥājzanā l-badhlū<sup>52</sup>

[The women] set out like shining stars from which  
 they took their beauty and their coquetry,  
 and a birthmark (like that of the full moon) on a face like it  
 was where we found what we desired so we refrained from  
 making gifts (?).<sup>53</sup>

Here, as in Poem 2 above, the beloved’s birthmark is likened to a spot on the moon’s surface; here the poet says figuratively “the birthmark of the full moon” (*ka-khāl al-badr*). But this poem also expands this celestial motif by comparing the group of beautiful women to brightly shining stars. The reader is asked to remember this pattern of alternating subsets—specks of contrasting color on sheets of expensive material and lunar simile—because al-Sarī al-Raffā’ will return to it again at the end of his chapter on naevi descriptions.

The next two poems in this chapter (Poems 5 and 6) are about male youths, whereas Poems 2 and 4 (discussed above) are about females. The similarities with the imagery that has come before is apparent. In Poem 5, the beloved is described almost as if he were a doll whose beauty is literally handcrafted.<sup>54</sup> The birthmark on his cheek is as though it had been painted there intentionally and his skin is so soft it is as if God has “given him a coat of pearl for skin (*albasahū qushūra d-durri jildā*).” The last line of the poem links it implicitly with the poem that follows, which in turn associates it with Poem 2 above: “And on his cheeks you’ll see / no matter when you come, a rose.” Keeping this rosy-cheeked boy in the front of our minds, let us consider the proposed connection with the poem that follows. The next poem (Poem 6) is also on a youth; one “cutely coquettish with nice eyes / a marvel like his creator” with two jet-black temple curls over his cheeks.<sup>55</sup> In the third line of this four-line poem, the poet describes the beloved’s birthmark as “cutting the heart of one who loves him (*yuqattī‘u qalba man ‘ashiqah*)” and it is this image of “cutting” that links the two poems. In the second line of Poem 2 (omitted from al-Nuwayrī’s version of the poem) the beloved’s birthmark is said

<sup>52</sup> Poem by Muslim ibn al-Walid (d. 208/823), known as Ṣarī‘ al-Ghawānī (al-Sarī al-Raffā’, *Kitāb al-Muḥibb wa-al-Maḥbūb*, 1:60–61). In al-Sarī al-Raffā’’s anthology, the 2nd hemistich of the 2nd line begins “*laqītu*,” but I have adopted the reading of the poet’s *Diwān* and other sources as cited in the textual apparatus.

<sup>53</sup> The concluding phrase “*fa-ḥājzanā l-badhlū*” is highly unclear; the translation offered here is a guess.

<sup>54</sup> Poem by Dīk al-Jinn (d. 235 or 236/849–51) (al-Sarī al-Raffā’, *Kitāb al-Muḥibb wa-al-Maḥbūb*, 1:61).

<sup>55</sup> Poem by Kushājīm (d. ca. 350/961) (al-Sarī al-Raffā’, *Kitāb al-Muḥibb wa-al-Maḥbūb*, 1:61–62).

to be cutting as well: “The beauty of the birthmark on her cheek cuts my heart; / if she were to unveil it, it would [positively] resound with magic (*tanaghghama bi-s-sihri*).” We can see how common metaphors serve to connect poems in these sequences, yet just as common metaphors and figures are repeated in these sequences, they are also implied. These implied figures also serve to connect poems in a sequence. Let us return to the rose on the youth’s cheek; this is a common enough image in erotic poetry.<sup>56</sup> But the rose on the beloved’s cheek is not always a mere rose; it can also be a freshly cut rose, as in the following hemistich: “His cheeks like roses freshly cut” (*wa-khudūduhū ka-l-wardi hīna qaṭa‘tuhū*).<sup>57</sup> And we can see the same imagery in the following line from a poem, which appears elsewhere in al-Sarī al-Raffā’s anthology:

*lahu wardun ‘alá l-wajna/-ti mamnū‘un mina l-qaṭfī*<sup>58</sup>

He’s got a rose on his cheek  
That’s forbidden to pluck.

The connection between roses and cutting is not made explicit but it certainly does seem plausible that there is an allusion to an imagined correlation that both of these poems conjure up. The figure of cutting plants may also tie into the idea of the *himá* (sanctuary) and its injunctions. In any case whether or not the cutting birthmark reminds the reader of cut roses, the arrangement of these two poems can be explained more simply: they are both on male youths, whereas Poems 2 and 4, which are grouped together, are both on women.

The next two poems (Poems 7 and 8) both compare parts of the beloved’s body to precious materials. In Poem 7, the beloved’s curls are made of jet, his [or her] brow is made of pearl, the birthmark on his [or her] cheek is a “flower of musk on moist earth.” In Poem 8, it is the birthmark that is compared to jet, after having been said to resemble the black spot of the heart, set in a cheek of pearl. The final three poems (Poems 9, 10, and 11) form a series and seem again to be linked—like the other groupings we have considered—by shared imagery or paronoma-

<sup>56</sup> It crops up several times in the chapter following the chapter on [descriptions of] naevi in al-Sarī al-Raffā’s anthology, the chapter on cheeks (*fī al-khudūd*); see 1:66, Poems 94 and 95; 1:68, Poem 98; 1:70, Poems 102 and 103; 1:70–71, Poem 104; 1:73, Poems 108 and 110; 1:74, Poem 111; and 1:74–75, Poem 113. See also further examples in the chapter after this one, “on [descriptions of] cheeks (*wajanāt*).”

<sup>57</sup> This line is from a poem by the unknown author of “Khadīm al-Zurafā’ wa-Nadīm al-Luṭafā’,” a seventeenth-century anthology preserved in the Bodleian Library (Oxford) MS Huntington 508, fol. 40a.

<sup>58</sup> Poem by Khālid al-Kātib (d. ca. 269/883) (al-Sarī al-Raffā’, *Kitāb al-Muḥibb wa-al-Maḥbūb*, 1:81, Poem 127). See also in the supplement (*dhayl*) in *Amour divin et amour profane dans l’Islam médiéval: À travers le Dīwān de Khālid Al-Kātib*, ed. Albert Arazi (Paris, 1990), 258, Poem 49.

sia. Poem 9 is also included in al-Nuwayrī's text; it is the poem about the female visitor which draws upon pilgrimage imagery (see above). As we have seen, this poem includes a comparison of the beloved's birthmark to the black stone (*hajar*) of the Ka'bah. The root *h-j-r* appears to link this poem with the first line of the next poem (Poem 10) in the sequence:

[من الطويل]

|                                           |                                                |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| مُقَلَّةٌ وَحَشِيٌّ الْمَحَاجِرِ أَدْعَجُ | أَغْنُ رَبِيبُ الرَّبِّبِ الْغَيْدِ وَالْمَهَا |
| كَنْفَطَةٌ زَاجٍ فِي صَفِيحَةِ زَبْرَجٍ   | لَهُ وَجَنَاتٌ نُكْتَةٌ الْخَالِ وَسُطَّهَا    |

*aghannu rabibu r-rabrabi l-ghīdi wa-l-mahā  
bi-muqlati waḥshiyi l-mahājiri ad'ajī*

One from the gazelle flock: gentle-voiced, supple-necked, and well-raised,  
alongside a wild cow with the big, black eyes of one feral.

And if it is *hajar* (the stone) in the preceding poem that leads to *mahājir* (eyes) in the next, it is then the second and final verse of this poem that introduces us to the concluding movement of the chapter:

*lahu wajanātun nuktatu l-khāli waṣṭahā  
ka-nuqtati zājin fī ṣafīḥati zibrijī*

Upon his cheeks, the spot of a birthmark in the middle  
is like a speck of copperas on a sheet of gold

The reader will recall the way this chapter began: with an alternating series of poems on specks of contrasting color on surfaces of expensive material and poems involving lunar similes. Thus we see that this—the final line of the penultimate poem—recalls the movement that began the chapter. Even readers who do not know Arabic can appreciate the paronomasia in the pair *nuktah* (spot) and *nuqtah* (speck) in this line and how it recalls the word that featured prominently in Poems 1 and 3, *nuqtah*. Technically, this feature of Arabic rhetoric is known as “*al-jinās al-muḍāri*” or, to use Pierre Cachia’s expression, “Variant Paronomasia,” in which the “matching terms” differ by one letter, representing a phoneme from the same, or a proximate, area of articulation as the phoneme it replaces (i.e., here *kāf* and *qāf* both represent velar sounds).<sup>59</sup> Likewise, the surface (i.e., the beloved’s cheek), which in the opening poem was “a sheet of ivory” (*ṣafīḥat ‘āj*) is described

<sup>59</sup> See Pierre Cachia, *The Arch Rhetorician Or The Schemer’s Skimmer: A Handbook of Late Arabic Badī’ Drawn from ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī’s Nafahāt al-Azhār ‘alā Nasamāt al-Ashār* (Wiesbaden, 1998), no. 42. Strictly speaking, the *kāf* is postpalatal and the *qāf* is uvulovelar; see further EI2, s.vv. “*kāf*” and “*kāf*” (both by H. Fleisch).

here as “a sheet of gold” (*ṣafiḥat zibrij*) and as in Poem 3 the birthmark is likened to “a speck of copperas” (*zāj*). These similarities and final-syllable *ḍ*-sounds make the connection between the end of the chapter and its beginning unmistakable. And if it were not already sufficiently clear, this poem is followed by a one-liner, the last poem of the chapter, which—mirroring the alternating sets at the beginning of the chapter—includes a lunar simile, along with a whole host of velar plosives:

[من البسيط]

يَا حُسْنَ حَالٍ بِحَدِّ قَدْ كَلِفْتُ بِهِ      كَأَنَّهُ كَوَكَبٌ قَدْ لَزَّ بِالْقَمَرِ

*yā ḥusna khālin bi-khaddin qad kaliftu bihī*  
*ka-annahū kawkabun qad luzza bi-l-qamarī*

O beautiful mole on a cheek I've fallen in love with  
It's as though a star has been stuck on to the moon.

This moon image—following on from the verse about a drop on a sheet of gold, which rhymes in *jīm*—brings the reader back to the beginning, giving this chapter of naevi verses a certain symmetry.

What is notable about the thematic progression and style of arrangement we find in the anthologies composed by al-Nuwayrī and al-Sarī al-Raffā' is that the anthologists fashioned a structured, literary order out of a well-known corpus of images and tropes. Anthologists always demonstrated their erudition through selection and commentary—the conventional standard by which anthologies are judged—but the dimension of arrangement is yet another technique of composition inherent in curatorial production. By employing the technique of variation in selecting and arranging epigrammatic poems on one narrowly defined poetic topic, anthologists could weave together an entirely different reading experience than one in which the poems are arranged more explicitly. By shedding light on this technique of variation in the arrangement of poetic collections, I hope to have shone a light on the literary potential lurking in many poetic collections once believed to have been put together “at random.”