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Prognostications at the Rising of Sirius in Late Antiquity

Scattered Late Antique sources in various languages attest to the practice of divination at the annual rising of Sirius, the Dog Star. The manuscript traditions preserving details about this technique point to its widespread diffusion and popularity from Egypt and Byzantium to Iran during the Late Antique period, though it is ultimately much older.

Sirius is the fourth brightest body in the heavens, after the Sun, the Moon, and Venus, and it is the brightest star in the sky. Since the beginnings of history its heliacal rising ñ its appearance just above the eastern horizon immediately before dawn once every year ñ has been taken as a herald of the rainy season across Western Eurasia. Religious traditions and festivals developed around this remarkable event in many communities in very ancient times, including the practice of divination of the events of the coming year. Predictions were based on fixed lists of events to be expected in a given year under headings according to the zodiacal position of the planets, sun, or moon at the rising of Sirius. An example from the *Geoponica*: ìWhen the moon is in Leo if the rising of Sirius occurs, there will be a big crop of grain, olive, and wine, and a low price of all other things. There will be tumult and slaughters, appearance of a king, softness of the air, raid of nation against other nation, and earthquakes and floods.

Guidelines for predictions of this kind are found in Greek in the *Apotelesmatica* of Hephaestio of Thebes (4th cent.) and in the tenth century Greek agricultural epitome of earlier works, associated with the name Cassianus Bassus Scholasticus, called *Geoponica*. The latter Greek work existed in Syriac, Middle Persian, and Arabic translations by the end of Late Antiquity. The Mandaean (Iraqi Aramaic) *Sfar Malwashe* (Book of the Zodiac), an astrological compendium drawing from a variety of unknown early sources, explains a similar system for predictions at the New Year when Sirius rises. A text in Arabic attributed to Hermes Trismegistus shows the diffusion of these methods from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages. This *Book of the Rising of the Southern Sirius*, not yet edited, survives in almost thirty Arabic manuscripts today, making it the most profusely attested of the several dozen extant Arabic works attributed to Hermes. Two varying introductions to the work attribute it differently to Iranian and to Harranian Syrian tradition. That a Harranian astrological tradition of this kind existed is testified to by the great ninth century astrologer Abu-Maëshar of Balkh, one of whose works in Byzantine Greek translation relates a fragment of the Harranian method for prognostications at the rising of Sirius.

After an overview of the sources and a comparison of the types of predictions made in the different works, illustrated with a handout, a few important questions require discussion. What were the sources of this tradition and what were the means of its diffusion? Who used these systems of divination? Was divination at the rising of Sirius used in the same ways by different communities? While definite answers to these questions are probably not possible on the basis of the scanty sources, the widespread attestation of the practice points to a common culture of divination shared across linguistic and political boundaries over the entire Late Antique period.