



# ANNALES ISLAMOLOGIQUES

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Blue and Green Eyes in the Islamic Middle Ages

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## Blue and Green Eyes in the Islamicate Middle Ages

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### ♦ ABSTRACT

In pre-Islamic Arabia pale, shimmery eyes (*zurq al-ʿuyūn*) were overwhelmingly associated with negative character traits. In this paper, I examine usages of classical Arabic words with the z-r-q root to understand how they are differently mobilised in the Qurʾān, Qurʾānic commentaries, hadith, early medical treatises and works of *adab*. Z R Q could signify “ill-omened”, “deceitful”, “blind”, and I will show how these definitions structured and reproduced rivalries between tribal groups (e.g. the Umayyads and the Abbasids), between Muslims and perceived Others (e.g. Muslims and Christians), and within local Muslim groups (e.g. supporters of Muʿāwiya and ʿAlī, Sunnis and Shiis).

**Keywords:** eye colour – Umayyads – al-Andalus

### ♦ RÉSUMÉ

Dans l'Arabie préislamique les yeux scintillants et clairs indiquaient un caractère négatif. Dans cet article, je m'interroge sur les mots issus de la racine Z R Q, qui peuvent signifier « maudit », « fourbe », et « aveugle », afin de comprendre leurs usages dans le Coran, les commentaires coraniques, les hadiths et les œuvres médicales et littéraires. En outre, je montre comment ces définitions ont structuré et reproduit les rivalités entre groupes tribaux

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(Omayyades et Abbassides), entre les musulmans et ceux qui étaient perçus comme autres (par exemple, musulmans et chrétiens), et entre musulmans (partisans de Mu‘āwiya et de ‘Alī; sunnites et chiites).

**Mots-clés :** couleur des yeux – Omeyyades – Andalousie

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## Introduction

William Shakespeare composed his drama *The Tempest* around 1610, and in this play Sycorax figures as a minor character. She has no spoken lines and she never even appears onstage. We know her through the vitriolic words of Prospero, a stranded inhabitant of the island that serves as the play’s setting. He introduces her early in the play:

This damn’d witch Sycorax,  
For mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible  
To enter human hearing, from Argier,  
Thou know’st, was banish’d:  
[...]  
This blue-eyed hag was hither brought with child  
And here was left by the sailors.<sup>1</sup>

Pregnant and in exile from her native Algiers, Sycorax gives birth on this small island to a son, named Caliban, who possesses congenital deformities. He is, according to Prospero, “a freckled whelp hag-born—not honour’d with a human shape”.

Scholars of *The Tempest* have debated the significance of Sycorax’ blue eyes, which are mentioned only once in the entire play. Leah S. Marcus has investigated 19th and 20th-century critical responses to Sycorax’ eye color, exposing anxieties about the collusion of blue eyes, North African ethnicity and witchcraft. “Modern editions overwhelmingly reject the possibility that ‘blue-eyed’ in this instance can possibly mean blue eyed.”<sup>2</sup> Of course not. The association of a North African witch with blue eyes, which have mostly positive associations for modern western readers, destabilizes the white normative body as, if not good, then at least neutral. As Marcus also stated, “The witch cannot have blue eyes, because the cultural image of blue eyes is overwhelmingly positive and Sycorax has to be understood as negative.”<sup>3</sup> Rather, arguments

1. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act I, Scene II.

2. Marcus, *Unediting the Renaissance*, p. 6.

3. Marcus, *Unediting the Renaissance*, p. 11.

have been made that “blue-eyed” refers to a (presumably pigmentless) pregnant woman’s blue eyelids, or to under-eye bags, or even to blue streaks that native women painted under their eyes. One scholar has argued that in the First Folio, Shakespeare rendered the term “blew-ey’d”, and his handwriting is indistinct enough that the word could be read “bler-ey’d,” meaning bleary-eyed.<sup>4</sup>

The figure of the blue-eyed witch has deep roots in Arabic folklore. The story of Zarqā’ al-Yamāma, a blue-eyed woman from the central Arabian region of al-Yamāma, dates back to 7th-century Arabia.<sup>5</sup> She possessed vision so acute that she could spot a white hair in milk and thus was able to see into distances that would take three days to reach in person. Her ability is constructed as an extraordinary physical capability, not as supernatural foresight. One day, she told her fellow tribe members that she saw trees marching towards their settlement to attack, but the people of al-Yamāma denounced her as insane. She was also accused of lying, then was seized and had her eyes gouged out. In fact, the enemy horsemen had covered themselves and their riding animals with leaves to disguise their advance and, as a result, successfully ambushed the settlement and defeated the settlers.<sup>6</sup> To imagine that Shakespeare drew inspiration for Sycorax from Zarqā’ al-Yamāma becomes easier upon realizing that elements of the story also reappear in *Macbeth*. Nicholson has noted the similarities between the prophecies of Zarqā’ al-Yamāma and the witches in *Macbeth*. Both predicted that marching armies obscured by tall leafy branches would attack and overpower the warned parties.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no positive evidence that Shakespeare had access to translations of such stories, but if he did indeed intend to describe Sycorax as blue-eyed, then he understood well Arab notions about blue eyes in the medieval era. Negative representations of blue (and green) eyes in Arabic literature and art were ubiquitous in pre-Islamic Arabia, and even continue to appear today in such popular symbols as the blue-eyed devil, a key figure in the Nation of Islam’s theology, and the evil eye, which is always rendered blue.<sup>8</sup> In this article, I will trace historical shifts in references to eye color in classical Arabic literary, theological and medical works to understand how Arab writers understood such traits in various contexts.

4. Marcus, *Unediting the Renaissance*, p. 8.

5. This story seems to have been based on a living person. In a list he compiled of blue-eyed Arabs, al-Ġāḥiẓ (d. 255/868) included Zarqā’ al-Yamāma, adding that “she is ‘Anz, one of the daughters of Luqmān b. ‘Ādiyyā”. See al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* 5, p. 331. Al-Ṭabarī claimed that the woman’s name was al-Yamāma (*al-Ta’rīḥ* 1, p. 630); Abū al-Faraġ al-Iṣbahānī (d. c.972 AD) cites Ibn al-Kalbī’s (d. 204/819) identification of Zarqā’ al-Yamāma as a woman named Hind (*Kitāb al-aġānī* 2, pp. 31-32).

6. Al-Badrī, *al-Durr* 1, p. 59. On Zarqā’ al-Yamāma, see Amer, “Medieval Arab Lesbians,” pp. 218-219, and Khoury, “Zarqā’ al-Yamāma,” pp. 312-313.

7. Nicholson, “Some Notes,” pp. 346-347.

8. According to one biographer, Wallace Fard Muhammad (disappeared in 1934), the founder of the Nation of Islam, “likened Caucasians to Shakespeare’s Caliban. They were ‘human devils,’ he said, the sons and daughters of Beelzebub”. Evanzz, *The Messenger*, p. 74. His disciple, Elijah Muhammad (d. 1975), warned his co-religionists of the blue-eyed devils: Muhammad, *Message*, pp. 16, 73.

## Color Terminology

The classical Arabic language has five basic color terms that also refer to hue and brightness: *abyaḍ* (white, brightly hued), *aswad* (black, darkly hued, pitch dark), *aḥmar* (red, brown), *aḥḍar* (dark-colored, blue, green), *aṣfar* (color tones from bright yellow and beige to orange and yellowish-dark brown). Beginning in the 19th century, Arabic dictionaries contained entries for rainbows that described them as purple, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange and red, perhaps marking a moment of colonial contact that dramatically shaped color perception and language.<sup>9</sup>

In 1969 researchers Brent Berlin and Paul Kay advanced an evolutionary theory of color terminology that fundamentally changed linguistic anthropology. All languages have at least two color terms, which are always white and black. A language with only these two color terms is known as a Stage I language. If a language has three color terms, then the third term will always be red, and three color terms make a language a Stage II language. In Stage III languages, terms for either yellow or green emerge. If yellow comes first, then in Stage IV, green would follow, and conversely, if green comes first, then in Stage IV, yellow would follow. Some languages, like classical Arabic, had a single term for green and blue, making it a Stage IV language. For instance, in classical Arabic poetry, the color of the sky is typically referred to as *aḥḍar*. Linguists refer to these as ‘grue’ languages. Stage V languages differentiate green from blue.<sup>10</sup> Modern standard Arabic has distinct terms for green (*aḥḍar*) and blue (*azraq*).

So, if *azraq* did not signify blue in classical Arabic, what did it mean? Wolfdietrich Fischer has shown that in ancient Arabic, the root Z R Q meant ‘luster’ or ‘shine’ and was used to describe the tips of swords, stars, eyes and bubbling water, and that the meaning ‘blue’, which eventually superseded the earlier meaning, came later. Pre-Islamic Arabs considered twinkling eyes, be they dark or pale in color, a flaw indicating inferior moral character.<sup>11</sup> This characterization explains the mistrust of Zarqā’ al-Yamāma (whose name should probably be translated as The Shiny-Eyed, Blue-Green-Eyed Woman from al-Yamāma), as well as the suggestion in Qur’ān 20:102 that on the Day of Resurrection “the day when the trumpet is blown, and on that day We will gather the guilty, shiny-eyed [*zurq<sup>an</sup>*]”. (This is the lone mention of *zurq*, a collective noun, in the Qur’ān.) Because of the many commentaries that this verse spawned, this verse is a rich place to investigate the meaning and significance of *zurq* and *azraq* in the early Islamic period.

9. Morabia, “Recherches,” pp. 70-71.

10. Berlin and Kay, *Basic Color Terms*, pp. 14-34.

11. Fischer, *Farb- und Formbezeichnungen*, pp. 53 ff.

## *Zurq* in Qur'ān, Qur'ānic Commentaries, and Hadith

### *Blind*

‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abbās (d. 61/687), the Prophet’s paternal cousin, interpreted the *zurq* of Qur’ān 20:102 to mean simply blind, and Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) noted that the *zurq* refers to eyes. Muqātil aimed to clear up some ambiguity about the object modified. Based on ancient Arab poetry, we know that the adjective *azraq* can be applied both to eyes and to other body parts, but when describing a person, tends to focus on his eyes. With the exception of al-Hawārī, who only gave blackened faces as an interpretation, every Qur’ānic commentary I consulted offered blind as a possible interpretation of *zurq*.<sup>12</sup>

Although the most commonly proposed interpretation, commentators reported that many sought clarification of this interpretation.

“Al-Ḥasan [al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728)], Qatāda (d. 117/735) and a group said: ‘blind.’ Someone asked, ‘How is this possible, for Allah said: ‘And you have certainly come to Us alone as We created you the first time.’ (Q 6:94) Allah created them sighted.’ The answer was: ‘It was related from Ibn ‘Abbās that during the resurrection there will be [different] times and conditions, so they will be gathered sighted, then they will go blind.’”<sup>13</sup>

This interpretation is particularly striking because al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī was *azraq*, and Qatāda was born blind. Another commentator reported:

“According to Ibn ‘Abbās, a man approached him and asked, ‘Have you seen this verse: ‘We shall gather the guilty, *zurq*,’ or in other words, blind?’ He said: ‘Verily, on the day of resurrection, there will be two conditions: *zurq* and blindness.’”<sup>14</sup>

*Zurq* is a condition distinct from, but perhaps arising from, blindness. For the majority of commentators, *zurq* represented a change of the colors of the pupil and iris. Al-Ṣam‘ānī and al-Baḡawī claimed that it was a *ḥuḍra* in the eye; al-Samarqandī, citing al-Qutabī, wrote that *zurq* meant that the eyes had turned white from blindness or that the pupil and the black (iris?) had disappeared. Other commentators, such as al-Zamahṣarī (d. 538/1144), agreed that *zurq* was an eye color, but stopped short of defining it as a pathology. Rather, to them, it was an eye color offensive to Arabs and constituted a disfigurement of the face. He wrote: “There are two main thoughts about *al-zurq*. The first is that *al-zurqa* is the ugliest eye color for Arabs, because the people of Rūm are their enemies, and they have *zurq* eyes. For that reason they describe

12. Juliane Müller has also found “blind” to be the prevailing interpretation of *zurq*. See Müller, “Die Farben,” p. 132.

13. Al-Ṣam‘ānī, *Tafsīr* 2, p. 354.

14. Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr* 7, p. 2434.



the enemy as black-livered, red-mustachioed and blue-eyed. Secondly, the meaning is blind, because a pupil that has lost its sight is blue.” Al-Wāḥidī, too, found it a naturally occurring, though ugly, eye color. He described *zurq* as “similar to the cat’s eye. Arabs despise *zurq* and curse it”. Al-Wāḥidī’s comparison of *zurq* mirrors al-Ġāḥiẓ’s language when he discussed the term *azraq*, as it related to the eyes of non-human animals:

“When people say, ‘a garment is *azraq*,’ they hold the view that it refers to a single color. When they use the same term to describe the eye, it refers to two colors (*lawnayn*). The falcon is described as *azraq*, as are the eagle and the black-winged kite (*zurraq*), all of which have golden eyes. So when people say, ‘the cat is *azraq*,’ they do not know whether they are referring to the colors of robes or to the shimmer of falcon’s eyes.”<sup>15</sup>

Al-Ġāḥiẓ used a single word, the Arabic term *lawn*, to signify both color and hue. Even in the absence of specific terminology for these properties, we see that when describing eyes, *azraq* could indicate hue (shiny), color (blue-green) or both (shiny, blue-green).

*Al-Baṣā’ir wa-l-ḥaṣā’ir* (Visions and Treasures), an anthology on literary topics by the Buyid writer Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023), defined a number of physical traits, some of which were considered blights, with incredible precision.

“If his eye protrudes visibly, then he is *ḡāḥiẓ*. If his eye is small and narrow, then he is *aḥwaṣ*. If his eye wanders towards his ear, he is *aḥzar*... If his nose is short and narrow, then he is *adlaf*. If his eye is green, then he is called *azraq*. If it [the eye] is between white and green, he is called *aṣḥal*. If they are veiny, he is *aṣkal*.”<sup>16</sup>

### Severely Thirsty

Al-Farrā’ (d. 207/822) summarized the two main interpretations of this term as either blind (*‘umyā*) or intensely thirsty (*‘iṭāṣ*). Qur’ānic verses support both of these readings. Qur’ān 17:97 reads: “We will gather them on the Day of Resurrection on their faces—blind, dumb and deaf,” and 19:86 reads: “And we will drive the guilty to hell in thirst.” In pre-Islamic and Islamic poetry, the dead and dying are frequently portrayed as suffering intense thirst. “Man’s conceptions of the afterlife are invariably influenced by his physical environment, and for those who live in climates where heat and drought are a constant threat, an even more unquenchable thirst may await the dead... [T]he thirst of the dead signifies a state in need of rectification as well as their suffering and agitation in the underworld.”<sup>17</sup> Later Qur’ānic commentators advanced theories that linked severe dehydration to a change in eye color.

15. Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* 5, p. 330.

16. Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣā’ir* 6, p. 146.

17. Homerin, “Echoes,” p. 177.

‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣam‘ānī (d. 211/827) claimed that the eyes would change from the body’s lack of moisture. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) stated that the thirst would afflict people during the gathering, and al-Zağğāğ (d. 311/923) seems to have been the first to propose that the intensity of the thirst would turn the black pupil of the eyes *zurq*. Al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076) repeated al-Zağğāğ’s claims and confirmed, “What he has said is correct. Thirst (‘aṭaṣ) affects the eye. This can be seen in the eyes of someone who has died of thirst. The following Qur’ānic verse bears witness to this interpretation: ‘And we will drive the guilty to hell in thirst.’”<sup>18</sup>

The notion of lack of moisture or dehydration affecting eye color finds further corroboration in the earliest Arabic ophthalmological treatises. Yūḥannā b. Māsawayh (d. 243/857), a Nestorian Christian physician, penned the earliest Arabic ophthalmological treatise *Dağal al-‘ayn* (The Eye Disorder). Chapter 40 describes the causes and condition of the disease *al-zurqa*, which is translated as cataracts or glaucoma. This disease arises from changes in quantity (increase or decrease) or quality (cloudy or clear) of the albuminoid or crystalline humors. The name suggests that it turns the eye blueish. Ibn Māsawayh remarks that a confluence of causes could lead to the eye turning black or blue-black<sup>19</sup>. Ibn Māsawayh’s student Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (d. 260/873) wrote *Kitāb al-‘aṣr maqālāt fi al-‘ayn* (The Book of the Ten Treatises of the Eye), one of the earliest Arabic treatises on eye diseases, and *Kitāb al-masā’il fi al-‘ayn* (The Book of Questions About the Eye), a companion piece organized as a question-and-response physician’s manual. In these two works based on Galenic principles and humoral pathology, Ḥunayn b. Ishāq explained that the four known iris colors—kohl black (*akḥal*), blue-green (*azraq*), blue-black (*aṣhal*) and brown (*aṣ‘al*)—result from specific humoral and environmental conditions.<sup>20</sup> Blue-eyed people have lower levels of the albuminoid humor (*al-ruṭūba al-bayḍiyya*), higher levels of crystalline fluid, a clear visual spirit, and cold, dry temperament. A black-eyed person has the polar opposite make-up: more albuminoid humor, less crystalline fluid, a cloudy visual spirit and a warm, moist temperament. A decrease in the albuminoid humor could cause the eye color to become blue.

“Therefore certain physicians call some (forms of) cataract *zurqa*; but not every *zurqa* that occurs is cataract, for there exists two kinds of *al-zurqa*: one is a kind of cataract of particular solidity (*ṣadīd al-ğumūd*). The other is a dryness attacking the lens (*glaucoma*).”<sup>21</sup>

The first type of cataract was thought to result from a thickening and hardening of a humor between the crystalline humor and the pupil. Ḥunayn b. Ishāq expanded on the second type to note that “l’autre est un dessèchement excessif qui atteint le cristallin. Cette forme n’est visible que si l’albuminoïde est transparente et subtile, car la transparence et la subtilité

18. Al-Wāḥidī, *al-Tafsīr al-basīṭ* 14, pp. 518-519.

19. Meyerhof and Prüfer, “Die Augenheilkunde,” p. 239.

20. Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq, *Livre*, pp. 38-39 (Arabic text), pp. 98-99 (French translation). Note that these colors are specifically applied to eyes, and are distinct from the five general color terms: red, yellow, black, white, green.

21. Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq, *Book*, p. 70 (English translation), p. 141 (Arabic text).



de l'albuminoïde permettent de voir la couleur du cristallin."<sup>22</sup> The 4th/10th-century ophthalmologist 'Alī b. 'Īsā al-Baġdādī (d. after 400/1010) wrote in his *Taḍkirat al-kāḥḥalīn* (The Ophthalmologists' Commonplace Book) that "when the nature of the eye is corrupted, and its color altered, the sight is restricted".<sup>23</sup> This could refer to this drying of the cystalline humor or even the solid cataracts, which restricted sight and could turn pupils blue. When left untreated, both conditions could lead to blindness.

Though these passages are rather technical and likely inaccessible to most medieval audiences, certain ideas about the causes of blue-green eyes must have been circulating among lay people, because Qur'ān commentators echoed some of this medical language in their interpretations of Qur'ān 20:102.

### *Black Faces*

In addition to blind and dehydrated, al-Ṣam'ānī gave a third possible interpretation of *zurq*, which was that a green color would appear in the eyes and black would be their faces. Later, al-Hawārī (d. 3rd/9th c.), al-Mawardī (d. 450/1058), al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), al-Baġawī (d. 516/1122), Ibn al-Ġawzī (d. 597/1201), al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) and others repeated this claim. Qur'ān 3:106 describes the Day of Judgment as one "when faces will be white or black". Those bound for heaven will have white faces, and those condemned to hell will have black faces. As Christian Lange has shown, most commentators of this verse have understood the blackening of faces as a literal, physical change, not a suggestion that the damned are disgraced or shame-faced.<sup>24</sup> This image of the dark-skinned, green-eyed sinner echoes the descriptions of the two angels Munkar and Nakīr, who interrogate and punish the dead in their graves.<sup>25</sup>

### *Terror-Stricken*

Less-common interpretations of *zurq* were that terror-stricken sinners saw their eyes change or had their gazes fixed in terror.<sup>26</sup> Qur'ān 12:84 suggests that Jacob's eyes turned white (*ibyaḍḍat 'aynāhu*) from sorrow, so certain commentators read that verse as confirming that one's emotional state, be it fear or sorrow, can cause one's eye color to change. Though reading *zurq* as terror-stricken was a minority opinion, it is in line with the previous three interpretations discussed here, as they all suggest an unnatural physiological change of pupil color. The ambiguity of the precise color, which is a type of green or blue, is essentially irrelevant, as whatever *zurq* signifies has unambiguously negative connotations.

22. Hunayn Ibn Ishāq, *Livre*, p. 123 (French translation).

23. Al-Baġdādī, *Memorandum*, p. 206.

24. Lange, "On That Day," p. 429.

25. Smith and Haddad, *Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, pp. 41-42; Wensinck, "Munkar," pp. 576-577.

26. Al-Mawardī, *al-Nukat* 3, p. 424; al-Ṣam'ānī, *Tafsīr* 2, p. 354.

## Hadith

*Zurq* is a rare subject in hadith, but when it does appear, it is understood to be a naturally occurring eye color or hue, and is associated with undesirable characters.<sup>27</sup> Ibn ‘Abbās narrated the following:

“The Messenger of God was in the shadow of one of his rooms. With him were a number of Muslims. The shadow was starting to disappear around them. He said to them: ‘A man will come to you who will gaze upon you with the eyes of Satan. When he comes to you, do not speak to him.’ Then an *azraq* came and the Messenger of God called for him. Then the man spoke these words, ‘O, knowledgeable one, you revile me—you and so-and-so,’ calling a number of them by their names.”<sup>28</sup>

A second hadith about an *azraq* man further demonstrates the association of blue-eyed people with immorality. In this tale, Muhammad tours the afterlife with the angel Gabriel. He sees Moses, Bilāl, Adam, “those who eat the flesh of men,” and finally a red-haired, *azraq*, unkempt man, whom he does not recognize. Gabriel identifies the last man as ‘*āqir al-nāqa*, meaning someone who kills and sections she-camels for sport.<sup>29</sup> Such a person was despised for his disrespectful treatment of an animal prized by Arabians for the milk and meat they provided.

## Lists, Prose and Poetry

This distrust of *zurq* individuals is mirrored in the period’s physiognomic literature, which confirmed prevailing negative attitudes toward people with light-colored eyes. As in hadith, literary depictions of *zurq* present them as naturally occurring physical traits. Imām al-Šāfi‘ī (d. 204/820), the founder of an eponymous Sunni legal school, deemed an *azraq* man with no facial hair and a protruding brow to possess “the most evil physiognomic characteristics possible”.<sup>30</sup> These pronouncements do not seem to have affected al-Šāfi‘ī’s jurisprudence, but are consonant with declarations in hadith and in other physiognomic texts. The anonymous 4th/10th-century Arabic encyclopedia *Kitāb sirr al-asrār* warned readers to “beware of every blond and blue-eyed person and, if he also has a very broad forehead, a small chin, large cheeks, a red body, and much hair on his head, beware of him as you would beware of a deadly viper”.<sup>31</sup>

27. Ibn Ḥibbān (d. 354/965) related a weak hadith on the authority of ‘Ā’iša that the Prophet declared *al-zurqa* in the eye to be a sign of good luck. Ibn Ḥibbān, *Kitāb al-maḡrūḥīn*, pp. 164-165.

28. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* I, p. 267. Variations of this hadith can also be found at I, p. 240 and 350.

29. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* I, p. 257. In Qur’ān 49:12, the phrase «Those who eat the flesh of their brothers» is a metaphor for gossipers.

30. Al-Bayhaqī, *Manāqib* 2, p. 134.

31. Monroe, “Arabic Literary Elements,” p. 320, fn. 103.

The undesirability of blue eyes is reflected in the following auto-narration that 7th/13th-century Arab writers attributed to the 3rd/9th-century Christian physician Ibn Māsawayh:

“I have a long face, a high cranium, a broad forehead, and blue eyes, and I was endowed with intelligence and a memory for everything that takes place within my hearing. The daughter of al-Ṭayfūrī was my wife, the mother of my son, and the most beautiful woman whom I had seen or heard of, although she was stupid and simple-minded, not comprehending what she said and not understanding what was said to her. So her son received all of our bad qualities and was not endowed with any of our handsome qualities, and if it had not been for the great meddling of the sultan and his entering into what did not concern him, I would have dissected this son of mine while living, just as Galen dissected humans and apes, so that I might learn by means of his dissection the causes of his stupidity, and he would have been released from his condition in this world.”<sup>32</sup>

Lists in Arabic of people with physical defects first appear from the *aḥbārī* (relater of histories and reports) al-Hayṭam b. ‘Adī (d. between 206/821 and 209/824) who organized a mostly unnarrativized list of sixty-one Muslim men into five categories: the blind, one-eyed, cross-eyed, *zurq* and those who had protruding teeth. Al-Ġāḥiẓ preserved the only extant version of al-Hayṭam b. ‘Adī’s list in his own *Kitāb al-burṣān wa-l-‘urġān wa-l-‘umyān wa-l-ḥulān* (The Book of the Leprous, the Lame, the Blind, and the Cross-Eyed). The three *zurq* people Ibn ‘Adī named were (1) ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Attāb b. [Asīd], (2) al-‘Abbās b. al-Walīd b. ‘Abd al-Malik, and (3) Marwān b. Muḥammad b. Marwān.<sup>33</sup> All three men were of the Bani Umayya. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān was born towards the end of the Prophet’s life, and his father was governor of Mecca immediately after the death of the Prophet. Al-‘Abbās was the son of an Umayyad caliph and was eventually imprisoned by the third man on this list, Marwān b. Muḥammad b. Marwān, the last Umayyad caliph to rule from Damascus. They both died in 750—al-‘Abbās in prison and Marwān in Egypt. Ibn ‘Adī himself was closely aligned with the Abbasid ruling family and likely produced this list to discredit the Umayyad clan. Blue eyes present a challenge for a family positioning itself as representing Arabs. This list is in keeping with the reputation he had earned for exposing the faults of his contemporaries.<sup>34</sup>

The three men that Ibn ‘Adī named as having protruding teeth—‘Amr b. Sa‘īd b. al-‘Āṣ, Yazīd b. ‘Abd al-Malik, and ‘Amr b. al-Zubayr—were, respectively, a supporter of Mu‘āwiya after the murder of ‘Uṭmān, an Umayyad caliph who died in 724, and an Umayyad supporter.<sup>35</sup> The eight cross-eyed men were all from Bani Umayya. As a juxtaposition, the men named as blind and one-eyed were all men who either lost their sight or an eye fighting a battle alongside the Prophet or who were among the Companions. Fighting in the cause of Islam was a noble

32. Translated in Savage-Smith, “Attitudes Toward Dissection in Medieval Islam,” p. 83.

33. Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-burṣān*, p. 570.

34. Ibn al-Qiftī, *Inbāḥ* 3, p. 365.

35. Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-burṣān*, p. 570.

pursuit, and injuries sustained there conveyed honor. Being born with cross eyes, protruding teeth and shiny, *zurq* eyes were simply ugly physical features that many found ignoble for caliphs.

Such a subtly polemical use of lists is also evidenced in later periods, as with Yūsuf b. ‘Abd al-Hādī’s (d. 909/1503) *Kitāb al-ḍabṭ wa-l-tabyīn li-ḍawī al-‘ilal wa-l-‘āhāt min al-muḥaddithīn* (The Book of Correctness and Clarity of Hadith Transmitters Who had Defects and Physical Blights). This brief list named forty-five weak transmitters who suffered from such physical disabilities as lameness, blindness or hemiplegia.<sup>36</sup> Instead of describing the men as unreliable transmitters, Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī emphasized their physical defects, which metonymically represented their professional defects.

In a separate work, al-Ġāḥiẓ expanded on Ibn ‘Adī’s list, naming several blue-eyed men and women from pre-Islamic and caliphal periods:

“Among the *zurq* are Ṣuḥār al-‘Abdī and his son ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ṣuḥār, al-‘Abbās b. al-Walīd b. ‘Abd al-Malik, Dāwud b. Mutammim b. Nuwayra, Marwān b. Muḥammad b. Marwān, Sa‘īd b. Qays al-Hamdānī, and Zarqā’ al-Yamāma. She is ‘Anz, one of the daughters of Luqmān b. ‘Ādiyā.

Among the *zurq* who were considered an evil omen was Qays b. Zuhayr. He was the eldest child, and his parents were eldest children. Al-Basūs was a blue-eyed woman, who was also the eldest child born of two first-borns. Things happened to her that I do not believe. Al-Zabbā’ was a blue-eyed woman. Among the blue-eyed members of the Qays b. Tā’laba clan are two men named al-Muraqqiṣ [the Elder and the Younger], as well as others.”<sup>37</sup>

Al-Ġāḥiẓ’ list is divided into blue-eyed persons who were neutral or good and those who were bad omens. Of the unlucky blue-eyed persons he named, none are Umayyad figures. In fact, they all lived in pre-Islamic Arabia or Syria. The two Muraqqiṣes were 6th-century Arabian poets; al-Zabbā’, also known as Zenobia in English, was a 3rd-century queen of Palmyra in Syria; al-Basūs lived in 5th-century Arabia; and Qays b. Zuhayr was a 5th-century Arab king. Conversely, the neutral/good category includes only one pre-Islamic figure, Zarqā’ al-Yamāma. The rest lived during or after the Prophet’s time. Most telling of al-Ġāḥiẓ’ intentions is that he placed the two dynastic Umayyads from Ibn ‘Adī’s list (the caliph Marwān and the prince al-‘Abbās) among the neutral and good. Al-Ġāḥiẓ apparently wrote a pro-Umayyad treatise that defended the accession of Mu‘āwiya to the caliphate, so his list could also be read as polemically as Ibn ‘Adī’s.<sup>38</sup> Here, al-Ġāḥiẓ historicizes the vilification of blue eyes as a pre-Islamic superstition. In pre-Islamic poetry, *zurq* is largely identified with enemies. The poet Suwayd b. Abī Kāhil (d. 65/684) wrote:

“O, Ibn Muka‘bar [al-Ḍabī], your eyes have turned *azraq* / Just as with every other *azraq* member of the vile Ḍabī clan.”

36. For more on Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī’s *Kitāb al-ḍabṭ*, see Richardson, *Difference and Disability*, pp. 96-109.

37. Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* 5, pp. 331.

38. Pellat, “Le culte,” pp. 59-65.

‘Abdallāh b. Hammām al-Sulūlī (d. after 715 AD), reviled Hamdānī people and noted that:

“Every *azraq* man of Hamdān applies kohl to his eyes.”

Dū al-Rumma (d. 117/735):

“If you choose to live among the *zurq al-‘uyūn*, they will steal [from you].”

Ru’ba b. al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ (d. 145/762):

“Say to the enemy: May I see you with your eyes *zurqa*.”<sup>39</sup>

Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), a contemporary of al-Ġāḥiẓ, and like him, a Baghdadi, named four blue-eyed men in his list: 1) al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī; 2) ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Abbās b. Ṣuḥār, whom he also described as red-haired; 3) al-‘Abbās b. al-Walīd b. ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān, and according to some sources 4) al-Zubayr b. al-‘Awwām<sup>40</sup>. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, the son of two slaves, may have been identified with the Umayyads, because his student founded the Mu‘tazilī sect that the Abbasids championed, but he also challenged the Umayyad caliphs on many theological issues. As such, it is hard to read his inclusion on this list as part of an anti-Umayyad campaign. Furthermore, the second man was a son of a Companion of the Prophet. The third was an Umayyad prince, and the fourth was a revered Companion of the Prophet. Like al-Ġāḥiẓ, this list is rather mixed, and when one reads the surrounding material, which are lists of people with various disabilities, like leprosy, lameness, deafness, cross eyes and baldness (*ṣul‘*), one finds a smattering of pre-Islamic figures, Companions of the Prophet, Followers, the Rightly Guided caliphs and also Umayyad caliphs.

Ibn Rustāh (d. 4th/10th century) named the same four men, except he rendered the second name: ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ṣuḥār b. ‘Ayyāsh. The last name could have been the editor’s misreading of or a scribe’s incorrect transcription of ‘Abbās. This distancing from the pre-Islamic superstition about shiny, blue-green eyes is also evidenced in contemporary Abbasid poetry. In the following poem by al-Wa‘wā’ al-Dimaṣqī (d. 370/980), the speaker praises his *azraq* male beloved:

“O you who are water shaping his nature  
O you wine in the deeds of his eyes  
O blue in the sword flash to shed blood

39. Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis*, p. 116, fn. 111.

40. Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-ma‘ārif*, p. 585. This author also includes a line of verse about blue-eyes and *zurqa* in his section on eye blights in ‘*Uyūn al-aḥbār* 4, p. 58.

A sword has no honor but in its blue  
 You teach my eye's pupil how to swim  
 His motion excels in his tears' sea."<sup>41</sup>

Echoing the image of the beautiful, cutting blue eyes, al-Sarī al-Raffā' of Mosul (d. c.362/972) wrote:

"They said in his eyes was blue  
 To harm so he turned them away  
 Can sword cut on the battle day  
 If its blade has no blue?"<sup>42</sup>

Ismā'il b. Ḥammād al-Ġawharī (d. c.393/1003) turned this praise on its head with this couplet:

"I saw a blond-haired, blue-eyed boy, who was small-brained and overly curious. / In his stupidity, he always preferred Yazīd, the son of Hind, to the son of the Virgin."<sup>43</sup>

Hind is the mother of the first Umayyad caliph Mu'āwiya, and Fāṭima's epithet is the Virgin. Her son al-Ḥusayn is meant in this verse. The thrust of the couplet is that the silly blue-green-eyed, blonde Sunni boy legitimizes Yazīd's claim to the caliphate, but not that of the Prophet's grandson al-Ḥusayn. The Sunni recognition of Yazīd, who was notoriously drawn to alcohol, sex, and music, as a leader of the Muslim community was especially sickening to Shiis, because Yazīd's troops killed al-Ḥusayn at Karbala in Iraq in 61/680. The blue-green eyes and blond hair in this verse align the boy phenotypically with the Umayyad family, and a reader would have immediately understood the poet's reference as an attack on groups, like blondes, pale-eyed people, and Umayyads, whom they felt were not authentically Arab and could not represent Arab, Muslim interests.

By the time Ibn al-Ġawzī (d. 597/1201) compiled his own list of three *azraq* men—al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Iyāḍ b. Ṣuḥār, and al-'Abbās b. 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān—the Abbasid caliphate existed in name only.<sup>44</sup> Much power had been ceded to new satellite empires springing up on the edges of the empire, and the Umayyads of Damascus and Cordoba were no longer in power. With no political need to discredit the Umayyads, it is unsurprising that this is the last list of blue-eyed people that I could locate. After the Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1258, rhetoric about blue eyes shifted from the antagonistic, superstitious tone of the pre-Islamic period, the delegitimizing campaign against the Umayyads during the Umayyad period and into the early Abbasid period.

41. Al-Ṭa'ālibī, *Dikra*, p. 53.

42. Al-Ṭa'ālibī, *Dikra*, p. 53.

43. Al-Ṭa'ālibī, *Yatīmat* 4, p. 469. I thank Nefeli Papoutsakis of Universität Münster for this reference.

44. Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Talqīḥ fuhūm*, pp. 446-450.



The identification of the Umayyad family, particularly the women, with blue and green eyes was strong in chronicles and highlighted by anti-Umayyads. The cultural identity of the Umayyads of Cordoba, who reigned from 138/756 to 428/1036, was also suspected of not being sufficiently Arab. The first Umayyad caliph in Andalus was ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, who fled Syria in 750 when the Abbasids seized power and wandered through North Africa and into al-Andalus. He established an emirate there in 138/756. Perhaps like their ancestors in Damascus, the Andalusian dynasty sought an “uncomplicated Arab patriarchal genealogy”, and hoped the geographical distance between al-Andalus and Damascus would allow an uncontested claim to Arab ancestry. However Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) stated that all but one Umayyad caliph and, indeed, all of their children were blond, and most of these were blue-eyed.<sup>45</sup> Many of the caliphs’ mothers were blue-eyed, blond Christian slaves from the north. The same crisis of legitimacy that afflicted the Umayyads of Damascus dogged them in Cordoba. The dark-haired, dark-eyed Andalusian subjects distrusted their rulers and cast aspersions on the Umayyad house for that reason.

The same hierarchy of beauty—dark eyes and hair over light eyes and hair—persisted in medieval Andalusian poetry, though some authors, like Ibn Ḥazm, praised fair features:

“D’après les poètes arabes, la brune avait un teint foncé, des yeux et des cheveux noirs, son opposée avait un teint clair, des cheveux blonds et des yeux bleus ou verts. Ces derniers ont été rarement chantés par les poètes andalous. En revanche, on trouve des poètes qui chantent la beauté des yeux verts chez les garçons.”<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

Much later, in Zangid, Ayyubid, Mamluk and Ottoman Syria, local Sunni writers expressed their pride in Syria’s Islamic past by reviving literature that praised the Umayyad family, by composing *faḍā’il* literature of Bilād al-Šām and its major cities, and by embracing the characteristics once used to disgrace the Umayyad family. The Damascene historian Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571/1176) incorporated biographies of Yazīd alongside those of Jesus and David in his voluminous history of Damascus. Furthermore, in this post-Abbasid period, we continue to find love poetry celebrating male, blue-eyed beloveds. The Aleppo poet Ibn al-Wardī (d. 749/1349) rhapsodized about a beauty that others found threatening:

“His eye possesses a blueness, and my heart is absolutely weak. / How strange is it that I love him, the blue-eyed enemy? ”<sup>47</sup>

45. Fairchild Ruggles, “Mothers of a Hybrid Dynasty,” p. 69.

46. Abu-Rub, *Poésie*, p. 200. See also Monroe, “Arabic Literary Elements,” pp. 320-321.

47. Al-Badrī (d. 894/1489), *Ḡurrat al-ṣabāḥ*, fol. 135v°.

Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 281/894), a descendant of the Banī Umayya, compiled reports on the merits of Mu‘āwiya in his *Kitāb ḥilm Mu‘āwiya*. Only one copy of this manuscript exists today in al-Asad Library, and it was copied in Mamluk Damascus. Women teachers in Mamluk Damascus frequently taught Ibn Abī al-Dunyā’s works.<sup>48</sup> To wit, one of the few mentions of this work being taught shows that in Damascus in 782/1380, a woman named ‘Ā’isha bt. Abī Bakr b. ‘Īsā b. Qawālīḥ taught *Kitāb ḥilm Mu‘āwiya* to Baraka bt. Abī Bakr b. Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Ṭaḥḥān al-Ṣāliḥiyya and her husband Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Bāsūfī. This detail was recorded in the scholarly biography of Baraka’s grand-nephew, a man who was incidentally known as Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Zurayq (d. 900/1495), or “Son of the Little Shiny, Blue-Eyed Man”.<sup>49</sup> And this same Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Zurayq had a grandson named Aḥmad b. ‘Umar b. Mūsā b. al-Dabīs al-Ṣāliḥī, whom Ibn Ṭūlūn included in his biographical dictionary *Daḥā’ir al-qaṣr fī nūbalā’ al-‘aṣr*. This entry is mostly devoted to discussions about depictions of eyes in Arabic poetry and hadith. Following a discussion of dark eyes, he writes:

“I know of no face [with dark eyes] that is beautiful. It is closer to defect than to beauty. Among the eye colors are [also] *al-zurqa* and *al-zurq*. In a hadith that Aisha related from the Prophet, peace be upon him, he said: ‘Blue eyes are auspicious.’ Mu‘āwiya said to Ṣuḥāb [sic, Ṣuḥār] al-‘Abdī: ‘You are blue-eyed.’ Ṣuḥāb responded: ‘*Al-bādī* [sic, *al-bāzī*, meaning ‘eagle’] is blue.’ The poet wrote of this: ‘They said that he was blue-eyed. I said to them, ‘In this, his qualities are a delight. Kohl-colored eyes are as similar to blue ones as jacinth is to obsidian.’”<sup>50</sup>

Jacinth is a deep blue gem, whereas obsidian is shiny, black volcanic glass. Though both were rare, in medieval Islamdom only jacinth was considered a precious stone. After citing this last verse, the biographeer, Aḥmad b. al-Ṣāliḥī, continues by reproducing poems by al-Sarī al-Mawṣilī and al-Wa’wā’ al-Dimaṣqī, which were discussed earlier in this article. Al-Ṣāliḥī’s insistence on the beauty of blue-eyed individuals reflects the prevailing sense among Mamluk and Ottoman Damascenes that blue-eyed Umayyad leaders embodied the noble Syrian past.

All of this evidence—from the Qur’ān to hadith, Qur’ānic commentaries to physiognomic treatises, poetry to prose—reveals the extent to which physical otherness lurks in our medieval Arabic sources and has a history. While the meaning of *zurq* shifted from shiny to blue-green to blue throughout the medieval period, the threat that this eye color posed never did. Certain writers, like the pro-Umayyad Abbasids al-Ġaḥiḥ and Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, tried to downplay the stigma of blue eyes and to embrace this feature as authentically Arab. This rallying cry was resurrected by Damascus seeking to emphasize the continuously holy aspect of the city from biblical times into their contemporary reality. To do that, the Umayyads could not be

48. Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*, p. 180.

49. Princeton Garrett, MS 178B, fol. 20r°. This manuscript is Muḥammad ibn Ṭūlūn’s (d. 953/1546) draft of a *ṭabat* for his teacher Nāṣir al-Dīn b. Zurayq (d. 900/1495). Ibn Ṭūlūn based his reorganized version on the second volume of Ibn Zurayq’s autograph *ṭabat*, which is held as “Ṭabat Ibn Zurayq,” British Library, MS OR 9792.

50. Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Daḥā’ir al-qaṣr fī nūbalā’ al-‘aṣr*, Gotha MS orient. A 1779, fol. 18v°.

represented as threatening Muslim piety or exerting illegitimate rule over Muslim subjects and their problematic characteristics had to be reclaimed for new political purposes and given new cultural significances.

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