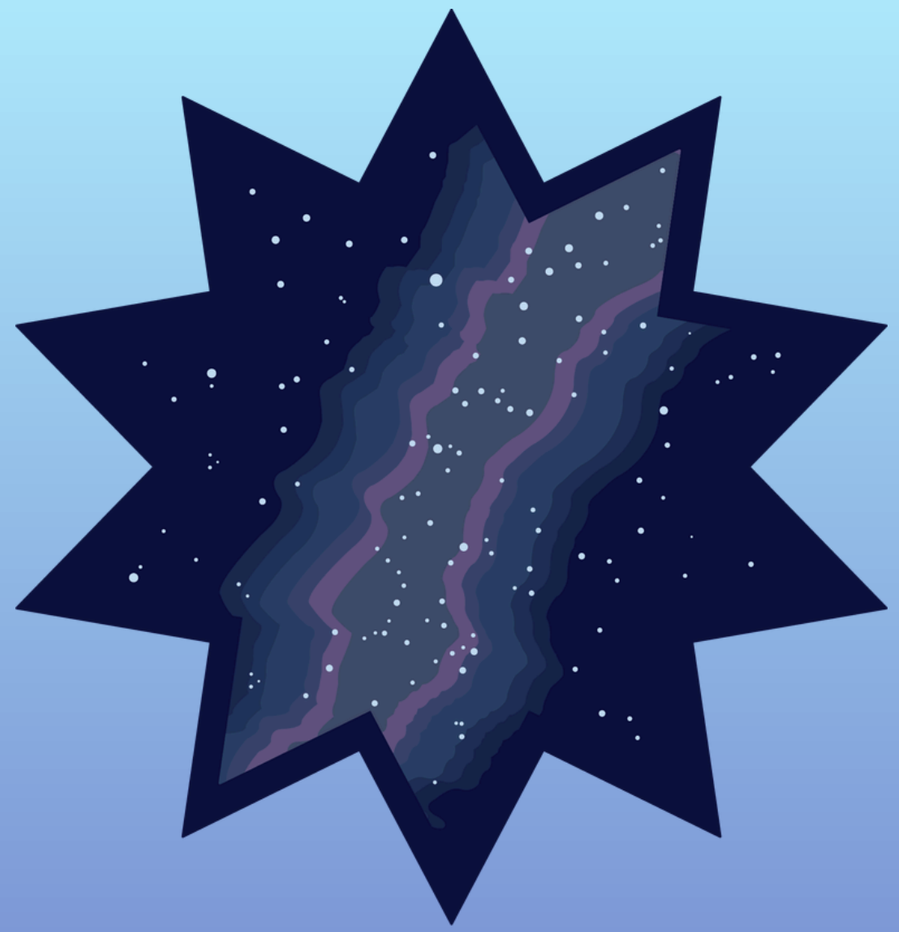


Umm al-Nujum

These resources are part of a University of Portsmouth project named Umm al-Nujum, Mother of Stars, an old Arabic name for the Milky Way. The project aims to teach children about the rich heritage of Arabic and Islamic Astronomy.

There are three posters:

1. A bright path in the sky — Long ago, what we call the Milky Way in English was compared to a path scattered with straw. Where did it lead?
2. The Sirius that crossed — In Arabic star lore, the Milky Way formed the backdrop for the dramatic lives of the brightest stars in the sky, whose positions helped guide navigation.
3. The Ostriches — As the Moon moves across the sky throughout the month, it passes through a series of mansions, each marking a stage in the passage of time. The Ostriches are one such resting place.

For further information about this project, contact Dr Rahma Alfarsy - rahma.alfarsy@outlook.com



A Bright Path in the Sky

Stories of the Milky Way

01

The old Arabs would look upon the Milky Way and see a bright road.
They imagined a farmer returning home at dusk, his cart piled high with freshly cut hay. As the cart rattled over the rough ground, bits of straw slipped loose and drifted behind him. A stalk here, a handful there, until a long golden trail stretched across the earth from the field to his door.



Umm al-Nujum

02

From this tale, the Milky Way earned its most popular name in Arabic: Darb at-Tabbana, the Path of the Straw-bearer: a scattered path of straw spilled across the night, marking the road of a farmer journeying home beneath the stars.

Several other cultures refer to the Milky Way by a similar name, including Syrians, Persians, Copts, and Turks.



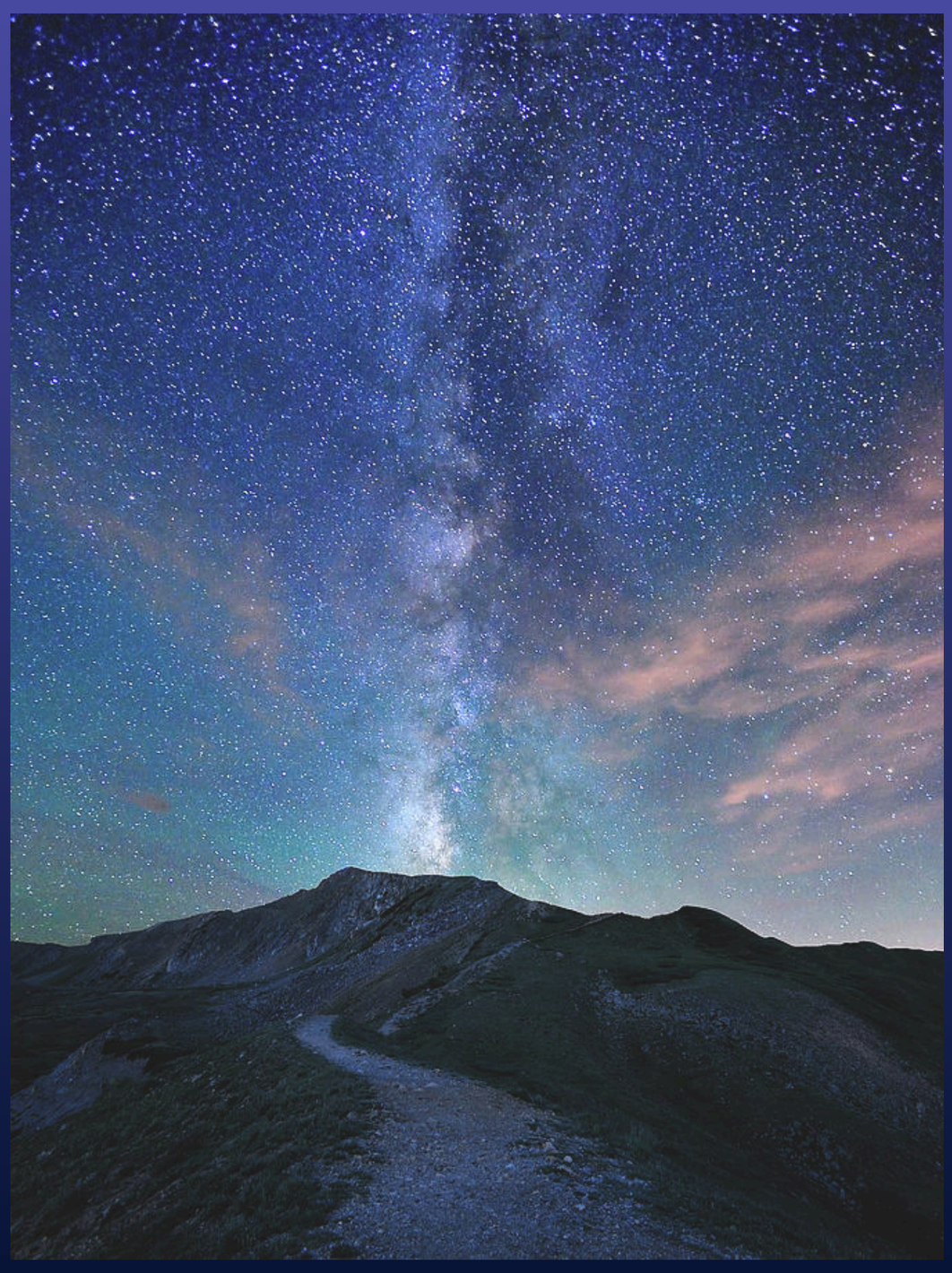
03

In Turkic cultures, the Milky Way was also known as:

- Hacılar Yolu, the Pilgrims Way
- Kabeyolu, Way of Kaaba
- Mekkeyolu, Way of Mecca
- Hicazyolu, Way of Hijaz

since in this part of the world the direction that the Milky Way stretched in the night sky corresponded with the direction leading from this area to Mecca.

Many cultures used the Milky Way as a natural compass during their night travels. It also served as an important guide for locating and identifiying other bright stars used for navigation.



The Sirius That Crossed

Stories of the Milky Way

01

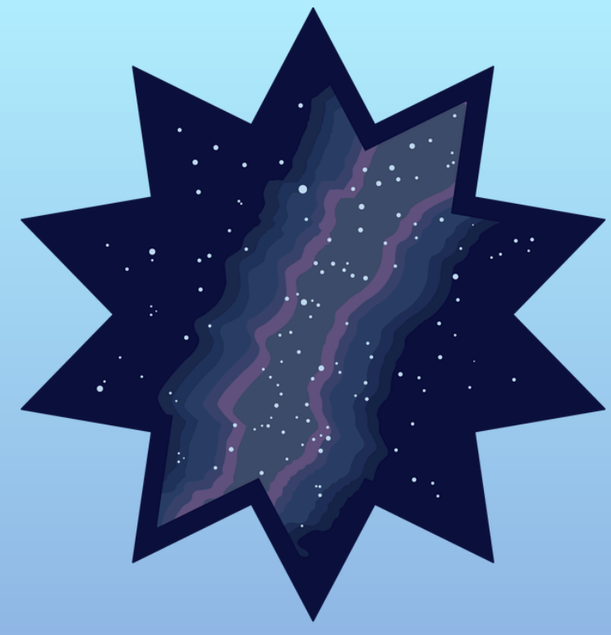
Long ago, Suhayl lived beside two radiant sisters: both named Shi’ra, on the Northern bank of the great River of Stars, the Milky Way itself.
Suhayl was betrothed to the mighty al-Jawza. When the night of the wedding came, a fatal accident left poor al-Jawza dead. Fearing for his life, Suhayl fled south over the Milky Way and towards Yemen.

02

His departure left a wound in the hearts of the two sisters. One of them could not bear the separation. She set out after Suhayl. Because she crossed that celestial river, the people of the desert called her Shi’ra Al-'Abur, "the Crossing Sirius". She continues to shine brightly till this day.

03

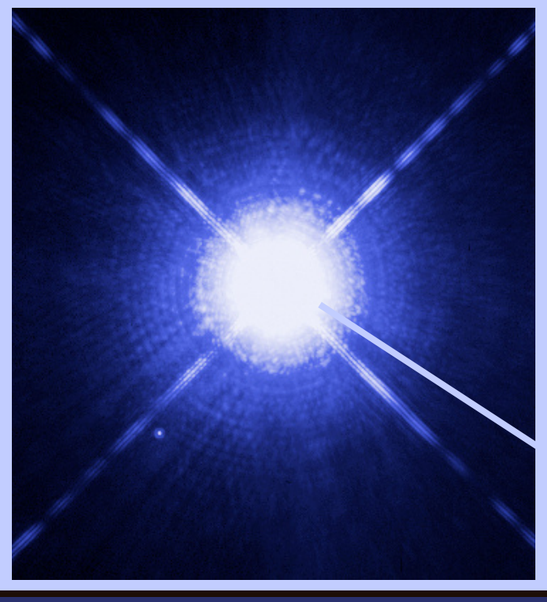
Suhayl’s other sister, however, remained behind. She watched her sister disappear across the shining stream and saw Suhayl fade into the southern sky. Night after night she wept. Her tears dimmed her light, and her eyes grew heavy and half-closed with sorrow. Thus she became known as Shi’ra al-Ghumaysa, ‘the Bleary-Eyed Sirius’. For this reason, her light dimmed and she is now the fainter of the two Shi’ra sisters.



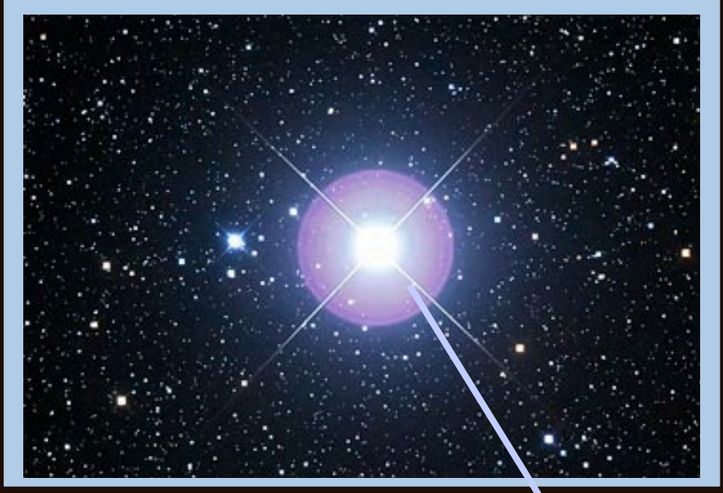
Umm al-Nujum



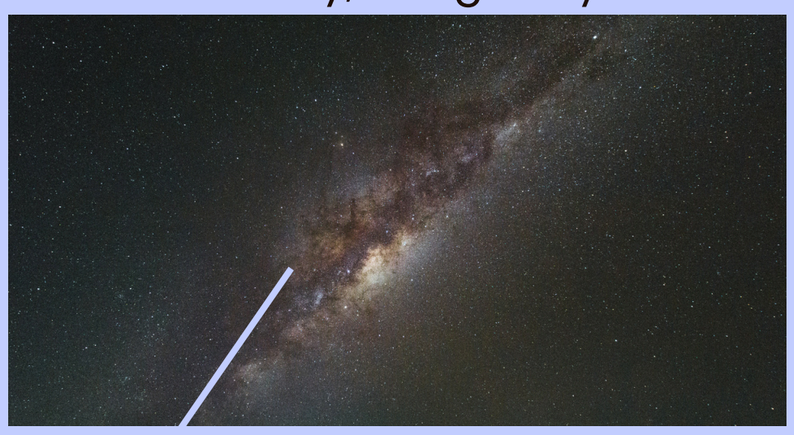
Sirius - Shi’ra al-A’bur
Brightest star in the sky.



Procyon- Shi’ra al-Ghumaysa



The Milky Way - al-Majarra
River of the sky, our galaxy.



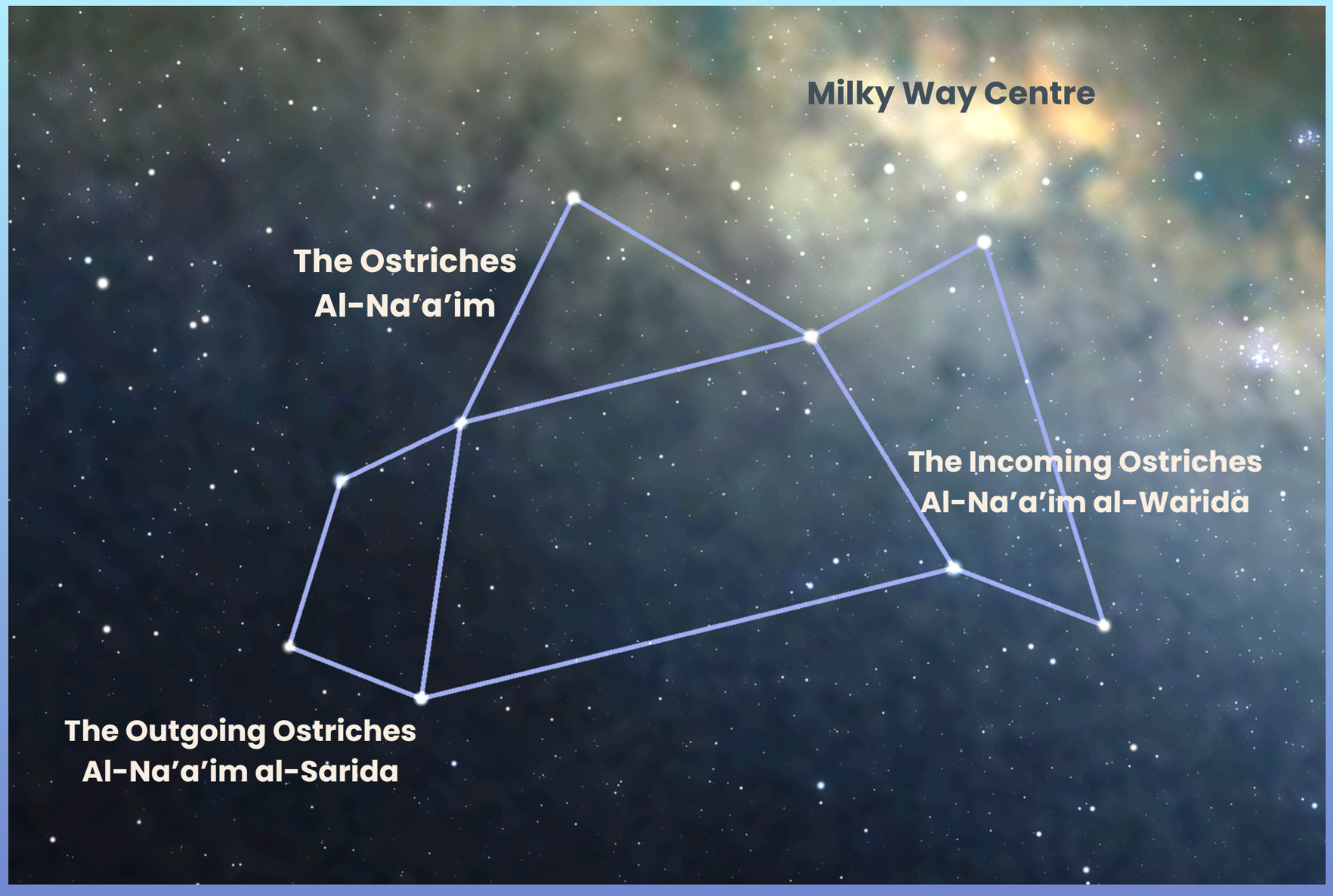


Canopus - Suhayl
Second brightest star in the sky.



Al-Jawza - The Hunteress
Orion Constellation





The Ostriches

Stories of the Milky Way

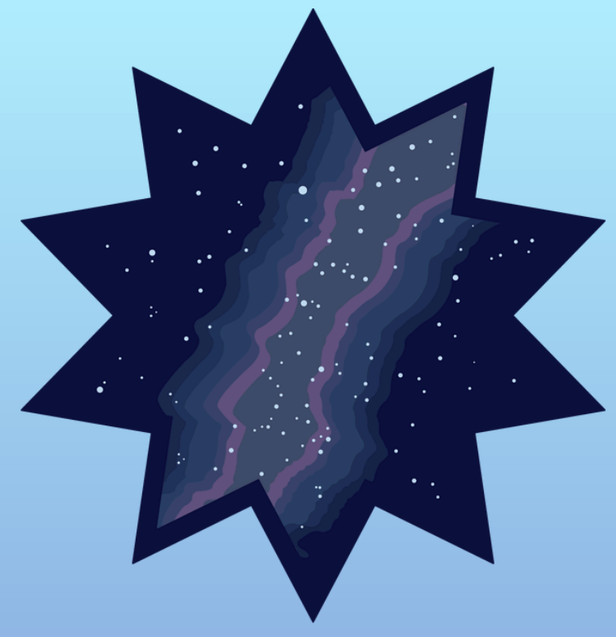
01

Near the edge of the Milky Way, stretching across the heavens like a shining stream in the desert, the ancient Arabs saw not merely stars, but a gathering of ostriches in two groups of four. They lie in the constellation of Sagittarius which aligns with the brightest part of the Milky Way - its center.

02

The first four stood within the river's glow. These were called Al-Na'aim Al-Warida, the Incoming Ostriches. From afar, they appeared as travellers approaching the water's edge, lowering their heads to drink from the bright river of stars. Night after night they remained there, forever arriving, forever thirsty.





Umm al-Nujum

03

Beyond them stood another group of four stars, arranged in a similar trapezium shape. These were Al-Na'aim Al-Saadira, the Outgoing Ostriches. Their thirst had already been quenched. They had turned away from the celestial river and were making their journey back across the dark plain of the sky. They were the travellers departing from the water, leaving the river behind.

Lunar Mansions

The Ostriches are not a constellation, rather, they are a lunar mansion. Lunar mansions are also patterns of stars in the sky. There are 28 lunar mansions. Each marks where the Moon rests for one night during its monthly orbit.

Desert nomads and farmers used these star markers to track seasonal changes, predict rain, time crop planting, and navigate across trackless sand and open seas.