ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL VALUES FOR THE MEAN SYNODIC MONTH

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In a paper published shortly before his death, Neugebauer reviewed the transmission of the standard Babylonian value for the mean synodic month (hereafter: M). He restricted his attention to this value for M and did not consider its derivation from the observational record. In other articles and books that he wrote over the years Neugebauer discussed a variety of values for M, but he did not gather these data together in one place. Recently, I argued that the Babylonian values for the lengths of the various months could have been derived from relatively crude observations by simple counting and arithmetic manipulation. The only value for which I was unable to find a simple derivation was the standard length of the mean synodic month, although I came upon a method that yielded a value close to it. I believe that this gap in the argument can now be filled by a much more plausible conjecture, based in part on information that has just come to my attention.

In this paper I will focus on a few selected values for M that occur in sources prior to A.D. 1500, starting with the Babylonians. In general, the precision of the parameters far exceeds their accuracy, but I will ignore problems of accuracy and report the evidence to the number of sexagesimal places given in the texts themselves (or that otherwise seems appropriate). For purposes of this discussion, it may be useful to distinguish ‘ghosts’ from ‘phantoms’: by a ‘ghost’ I simply mean a value unintended by the author that is ascribed to him as a result of a copyist’s error or, in modern times, a printer’s error; by a ‘phantom’ I mean a value correctly derived from rounded data that yields an unintended value. Both ghosts and phantoms may occur in ancient and modern literature. As a rule, I have tried to avoid both ghosts and phantoms, but for an example of a phantom, see Appendix 1.

The standard Babylonian value for M is 29;31,50,8,20d and it is associated with System B where it appears in the form 29d 191;0,50 ū š (where ū and š correspond to time-degrees: 360ū = 1d). In medieval texts, it is also given equivalently as 29d 12;44,3,20h and 29d 12h 793p (where ‘p’ stands for ‘parts’, and 1080p = 1b). This value is close to what one would get from taking the 18-year period of 223 synodic months (called the Saros) to be 6585;20d, for 6585;20d/223 = 29;31,50,18,...d. Another attested Babylonian value for the Saros of 223 months is 6585;19,20d which yields M = 29;31,50,8,4,...d. Since the same tablet has the standard value for M, it could be argued that 6585;19,20d was curtailed from 6585;19,20,58,...d = 223 · 29;31,50,8,20d, i.e., that M = 29;31,50,8,4,...d is a phantom. But before reaching this conclusion, further discussion is needed (see below).

In a Babylonian text recently discovered by John Steele (BM 45861), there is a...
zigzag scheme that, he argued, represents the excess of the Saros over 6585 days, measured in \(uš\). This suggests that one should consider the length of 223 months (the Saros) as the primary datum rather than the length of 1 month that was probably derived from it. Moreover, the surplus over 6585 days should be considered in the first instance in \(uš\), rather than in sexagesimal fractions of a day. In fact, the Babylonians recorded the time of eclipses in \(uš\) (before or after sunrise or sunset) and, in the early period (c. –750 to c. –570), these times were given in units of 5\(uš\). Hence, 6585;20\(d\) should be recast as 6585\(d\) 120\(uš\). There are good reasons to believe that the Babylonians had begun a systematic record of eclipse observations in –746, although the early years are poorly represented in the extant documents.

The Babylonian scheme is deceptively simple. This zigzag has the following characteristics (see the dashed line in Figure 1): its period is 18 lines, each step (i.e., the line-by-line difference) is 5\(uš\), the minimum is 95\(uš\), the maximum is 140\(uš\), the amplitude (i.e., the difference between maximum and minimum) is 45\(uš\) or 9 \(\cdot\) 5\(uš\), and the mean value is 117;30\(uš\) (= 0;19,35\(d\)). This implies that \(M = 29;31,50,12,...\)\(d\).

In Figure 1, this zigzag is compared to what one finds by modern computation for a set of eclipse possibilities with the following conditions. In each Saros of 223 months there are 38 eclipse possibilities, and to each of them is assigned the length of the following 223 months in excess over 6585 days. If the eclipse possibilities are
assigned an indexing number, they form two sets of 19 eclipse possibilities (one set with odd numbers, and the other with even numbers). If these two sets are separated, the resulting graphs are similar to one another, i.e., the curve for one set is very nearly the reflection of the other about the mean value. The function displayed as a solid line in Figure 1 is for the odd-numbered set of 19 eclipse possibilities in a series of Saroi, beginning in –746 and extending for about 200 years. The period of 18 for the zigzag seems to have been chosen for arithmetic simplicity, instead of the accurate value of 19 corresponding to half the number of eclipse possibilities, and Steele has not determined how the Babylonians took account of this discrepancy. Despite all the indications of arithmetic simplicity and ‘nice’ numbers, the graph of the zigzag function is very close to the recomputed data. Steele remarks that about 100 years of data would have been sufficient to determine the parameters for the zigzag function and, as he also notes, the recomputed data indicate that the minimum of the zigzag is reasonably good whereas the maximum is a little too high, perhaps to maintain the simplicity of the amplitude. In units of $5^\mu$, a maximum of $135^\mu$ looks like a better value than the attested $140^\mu$, and it yields a mean value of $115^\mu$ or $M = 29;31,50,5,...d$.

The zigzag scheme, even as modified, yields a length of the mean synodic month that is close to the standard value, but not identical to it. I then realized that to arrive at ‘8’ in the third sexagesimal place, one would need a mean value of about $116^\mu$ (which cannot be derived directly from a minimum and a maximum expressed in units of $5^\mu$). Such a value might arise, however, if one decided that a maximum of $135^\mu$ was slightly too low and that a maximum of $140^\mu$ was too high (keeping the minimum at $95^\mu$). The decision in favour of $116^\mu$ as the mean value is not explained by this argument, but the choice would have been limited to the interval between $115^\mu$ and $117;30^\mu$. Taking $116^\mu$ as the mean value, $223 \cdot M = 6585;19,20^d$, and $M = 29;31,50,8,4,...d$. (To get the standard value for $M$ exactly, one would need an excess over $6585^d$ of $116;5,50^\mu$.) Note that this value for the Saros, $6585;19,20^d$, appears in a Babylonian text where we thought it might be a result of rounding, but here it seems to be a plausible number in its own right. To be sure, the text in which it appears was written long after the early stages in the development of System B, and so it is not clear if its occurrence there provides relevant historical data. Also, Britton has argued (in a personal communication) that the fourth sexagesimal place (‘20’ in the standard value) was chosen by the Babylonians for arithmetic convenience in the scheme used in System B, and that it is sufficient to account for the ‘8’ in the third place. The derivation proposed here can only be considered ‘possible’ for there is no textual evidence that directly supports it. On the other hand, the Babylonians never derive their parameters explicitly, and one is left with possibilities of varying degrees of plausibility, to be judged by their compatibility with the interests of the Babylonians and the results they achieved. Further, it seems more likely that the Babylonians did not directly seek mean values by averaging lots of data; rather, they probably focused their attention on minimum and maximum values that occur in relatively short time intervals from which they derived the mean.$^8$

In the *Almagest*, Ptolemy gives the Babylonian value for $M$, $29;31,50,8,20^d$, and
associates it with a cycle of about 345 years: \(4267^m = 126007^d 1^h.9\) In fact, \(4267 \cdot 29;31,50,8,20^d \approx 126007^d 1;5^h.\) Aaboe and others have noticed that Copernicus has \(M = 29;31,50,8,9,20^d\) which results from dividing \(126007^d 1^h\) by \(4267^m,\) the two values given in the *Almagest*.\(^{10}\) The variant, \(29;31,50,8,9,20^d,\) already appeared in al-Ḥajjāj’s Arabic translation of the *Almagest* in the ninth century and then in many medieval texts in Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin. \(^{11}\) So, in his *Yesod ṭolam*, Isaac Israeli (c. 1310) reports the value \(29;31,50,8,9,20^d\) as that of Hipparchus cited by Ptolemy, and al-Bīrūnī (d. c. 1050) cites the value \(29;31,50,8,9,20,13^d.\) \(^{12}\) Ibn Yūnus (c. 1000) and al-Bītrijj (c. 1200) have \(29;31,50,8,9,24^d\) and, as Neugebauer noted, this variant also appears in some Ethiopic texts. \(^{13}\) It would seem that the variant \(29;31,50,8,9,20^d\) was a phantom in the ninth century in the sense that it was ascribed to Ptolemy who did not intend it, particularly if it resulted from a rounding of \(1;5^h\) to \(1^h\) in the length of 4267 months.

The mean synodic month continued to serve as a fundamental astronomical parameter in the Middle Ages. Although a great variety of values are recorded in this period, we will discuss only a few of those that occur in Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin texts. The origins of these values are diverse but, as far as I can determine, there is only one case where the value is derived from specific observational data.

In contrast to the value for \(M\) that ultimately came from Babylon, some medieval authors depended on Hindu sources. Of particular interest is the value, \(29^d 12;44,2,17,21,12^h (= 29;31,50,5,43,23^d),\) supposedly based on observations but suspiciously close to Hindu values, that al-Bīrūnī ascribes to the Banū Mūsā (ninth century). \(^{14}\) Yaʿqūb ibn Ṭāriq (eighth century), as reported by al-Bīrūnī, gives the correlation that \(57,753,300,000\) revolutions of the Moon take place in \(1,577,916,450,000^d\) and in \(4,320,000,000\) revolutions of the Sun, which implies that \(M = 29;31,50,5,43,24,\ldots^d (= 29 189005/356222\ d,\) according to al-Bīrūnī), and these numbers derive from the *Brahmasphutasiddhānta* [BSS] of Brahmagupta (seventh century). \(^{15}\) Ibn al-Muthannā (tenth century) ascribes to Ptolemy the value \(29;31,50,5,44,33^d\) that clearly belongs to the Indian tradition and al-Ḥashimi (late ninth century) has a similar value, \(29;31,50,5,43,33^d,\) which is also ascribed to Ptolemy. \(^{16}\)

The Jewish tradition for \(M\) presents a number of problems. The value for \(M\) in the Jewish calendar is \(29^d 12^h 793^p,\) and it is equivalent to the standard value for \(M.\) The earliest source is a passage in the Babylonian Talmud that ascribes a value of \(M\) to Rabban Gamaliel (second century) of \(29\frac{1}{2}\) days and \(\frac{3}{2}\) hour and 73 parts (it is generally assumed that in this text ‘part’ means what it does in later treatments of the Jewish calendar where \(1080^p = 1^h):\)

Our Rabbis taught: Once the heavens were covered with clouds and the likeness of the moon was seen on the twenty-ninth of the month. The public were minded to declare New Moon, and the Beth din [court] wanted to sanctify it, but Rabban Gamaliel said to them: I have it on the authority of the house of my father’s father that the renewal of the moon takes place after not less than twenty-nine days and a half and two-thirds of an hour and seventy-three parts. \(^{17}\)
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The earliest evidence for the standard value in the form, 29\textsuperscript{d} 12\textsuperscript{h} 793\textsuperscript{p}, comes from an Arabic text by al-Khwarizmi (ninth century) discussed by Kennedy.\textsuperscript{18} It is also reported by al-Biruni, and then by such Jewish scholars as Ibn Ezra, Bar Hiyya, and Maimonides, all of whom lived in the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{19} Two early Jewish sources have 3\textsubscript{b} and 73\textsuperscript{p} and they have been called into question as possibly corrupt due to later interventions, but the arguments are not persuasive:\textsuperscript{20} note that they do not present M in the same form as in the later tradition. The unit called a ‘part’ (Heb. heleq) is peculiar and Neugebauer argued that it represents the Babylonian unit called še (barleycorn), used in the theory of lunar latitude, where 180 še = 1 cubit of 2;30\textsuperscript{o}.\textsuperscript{21} Since an hour corresponds to 15\textsuperscript{o}, we can set 6 cubits = 1\textsuperscript{p}, and then 1080 še = 1\textsuperscript{b} (as in the Jewish calendar). The problem is that for measuring time the Babylonians generally used us (time-degrees) and beru (double-hours or 30\textsuperscript{o}). Although seasonal hours are found in some Babylonian texts, I am not aware of any equinoctial hours.\textsuperscript{22} So the use of equinoctial hours seems to point to a Greek source. Moreover, there is a word for barleycorn in Hebrew, and a unit called a barleycorn (shaṭ’ra) was still used in Arabic for linear measurement in Iraq in the ninth century.\textsuperscript{23} In the Jewish tradition, ‘part’ as a unit of time only appears in calendrical contexts.\textsuperscript{24}

Levi ben Gerson (d. 1344), also known as Gersonides, cites the traditional Jewish value both as 29;31,50,8,20\textsuperscript{d} and 29\textsuperscript{d} 12\textsuperscript{h} 793\textsuperscript{p}, and contrasts it with the value 29;31,50,8,9,20\textsuperscript{d} that he ascribes to Ptolemy and Hipparchus, presumably based on the Hebrew version of the Almagest that, in turn, was based on the Arabic version of al-Hajjaj.\textsuperscript{25} He then determined a new value based on two lunar eclipses, one observed by Ptolemy and one that he observed himself (see Appendix 2): 29;31,50,7,54,25,3,32\textsuperscript{d}.\textsuperscript{26} Levi’s value for M was adopted, with slight modification, by Jacob ben David Bonjorn (fourteenth century) in his eclipse tables that were composed in Hebrew and then translated into Latin and Catalan. From the cycle he introduced, namely, that 11324\textsuperscript{d} 23;34,11\textsuperscript{b} corresponds to 383;30 synodic months, it follows that M = 29;31,50,7,53,39,49\textsuperscript{d}.\textsuperscript{27} It is likely that in deriving his cycle Bonjorn rounded (or curtailed) Levi’s value for M, or intermediate computations based on it, for the difference between Bonjorn’s value and Levi’s only accumulates to about 0;0,2\textsuperscript{b} in 383;30 months or about 31 years.

The daily motion in lunar elongation from the Sun that appears in the Parisian version of the Alfonsine Tables (c. 1320), namely 12;11,26,41,37,51,50,50\textsuperscript{d}, implies that M = 29;31,50,7,37,27,8,25\textsuperscript{d} which is close to Levi’s value but, as usual, there is no indication of the way it was determined.\textsuperscript{28} The Parisian version of the Alfonsine Tables was already in place when Levi derived his value for M, but there is no evidence to suggest that he was aware of the work by his Parisian contemporaries. On the other hand, in the Toledan Tables that were widely diffused in medieval Europe, the table for syzygies is based on Ptolemy’s value for M, 29;31,50,8,20\textsuperscript{d}.\textsuperscript{29}

The data are summarised in Appendix 3, and it is readily seen that the standard Babylonian (System B) value was by no means universally accepted in the Middle Ages. As far as I can determine, Levi ben Gerson provides the earliest explicit derivation of a value for M from the circumstances of observed eclipses.
APPENDIX 1

In Ptolemy’s *Planetary hypotheses*, Book 1, we find the correlation:

$$8523 \text{ trop. yrs} = 8528 \text{ yrs} + 277;20,24 \text{ d} = 105416 \text{ m}$$

(where 1y = 365d).

As Neugebauer noticed, it follows that

$$M = 29;31,50,8,48,... \text{d} = \left(\frac{8528 \cdot 365 + 277;20,24}{105416}\right) \text{d}$$

which is otherwise unattested. Is this an unintended value (i.e., a “phantom”)? It seems to be the result of rounding, for:

$$\left(29;31,50,8,20\text{d} \cdot 105416\text{m}\right)/365;14,48\text{d} = 8522;59,57,... \text{ trop. yrs}$$

$$\approx 8523 \text{ trop. yrs}.$$  

Curiously, Ptolemy himself transforms the number of tropical years into a number of days (with two places of sexagesimal fractions) and this leads to a false sense of accuracy. Ptolemy should have said that 105416 synodic months are approximately equal to 8523 tropical years, and left it at that.

APPENDIX 2

Given the times of eclipse-middle of two lunar eclipses, $M$ may be determined from the corresponding mean oppositions. This procedure requires the following corrections: (1) a correction for the time difference between the two places of observation; (2) corrections for the equation of time; (3) a small correction for the difference between eclipse-middle and true opposition; and (4) a correction of the time interval from true opposition to mean opposition that, in turn, depends on the solar and lunar anomalies. Condition (4) can be ignored only if there is a return in both solar and lunar anomaly (as noted by Ptolemy in *Almagest*, iv.2). Levi ben Gerson’s *Astronomy*, Chapter 82, illustrates this procedure.

Levi cites two lunar eclipses, separated by 14854 synodic months: one observed by Ptolemy (20/21 Oct. 134: Goldstine no. 14035) and one that he observed himself (2/3 Oct. 1335: Goldstine no. 28889). Note that this is not a period of return for lunar anomaly: Ptolemy gives the lunar anomaly at the time of the eclipse he observed as 64;38°, and Levi gives the lunar anomaly at the time of his eclipse as 143;31°. Levi indicates that the time difference between Alexandria and Orange (where he lived) is 1;56h, based on Ibn Ezra’s claim that Montpellier is 2;16h to the west of Jerusalem together with the assumptions that Jerusalem is 0;20h east of Alexandria and that Orange and Montpellier lie on the same meridian, very nearly. Levi takes the time interval between the two eclipses to be 1201 Eg. yrs + 282d + 6;35h, and then adds a correction of 3;24h to yield the time interval between the corresponding two mean oppositions: 438647;24,57,30d (= 1201 Eg. yrs + 282d + 9;59h).

Levi appeals to Ptolemy’s observation of a lunar eclipse in *Almagest*, iv.6, and reports that the mean solar longitude was Libra 26;42° with a solar equation of –1;32° or a true longitude of Libra 25;10°; whereas the mean longitude of the Moon was Aries 29;30°, i.e., the mean elongation was 182;48°. Levi then gives the time of eclipse-middle since the epoch of Era Nabonassar as 881 Eg. yrs + 91d + 10;30h after mean noon (taking the equation of time to be –0;30h). Levi’s own eclipse took place,
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he tells us, on 2 Oct. 1335, 15:9h after mean noon in Orange, or 2083 Eg. yrs + 8d + 17:5h after mean noon in Alexandria, since the epoch of Era Nabonassar (taking into account the time difference between Orange and Alexandria). Hence the time interval between the two eclipses is 1201 Eg. yrs + 282d + 6:35h. The mean elongation at the time of the Levi’s eclipse was 181:4,18° (with Heb.; Latin: 181:14,18°); hence the difference in elongation between the two eclipses is 1:43,42° (= 182:48° – 181:4,18°).

The correction, 3:24h, was probably computed from the following equation:

\[ \Delta t = \Delta \eta / (v_m - v_s) \]  

(1)

where \( \Delta t \) is the correction in time corresponding to \( \Delta \eta \), the difference in elongation, and \( v_m \) and \( v_s \) are the mean motions of the Moon and Sun, respectively. Then, substituting \( \Delta \eta = 1:43,42° \), \( v_m = 0:32,56°/h \), and \( v_s = 0:2,28°/h \), it follows that

\[ \Delta t = \Delta \eta / (v_m - v_s) = 1:43,42° / 0:30,28° / h \approx 3:24h. \]  

(2)

Levi’s tables 40–43 are not invoked here, but they yield the interval to be added to mean opposition in order to obtain the time of true opposition.36 With Oct. 2 and anomaly 143:31° (for Levi’s eclipse), I compute 2:27h (= 9:6b + 0:35b + 15:48h + 0:58b – 24b); and with Oct. 20 and anomaly 64:38° (for Ptolemy’s eclipse), I compute 5:39h (= 9:37h + 0:39h + 19:1h + 0:22h – 24h). Therefore, the difference, 5:39h – 2:27h = 3:12h (i.e., \( m_2 = t_2 – 2:27h \), and \( m_1 = t_1 – 5:39h \); hence, \( m_2 – m_1 = t_2 – t_1 – 2:27h + 5:39h \), where \( m \) and \( t \) are the times of mean and true opposition, respectively), which is close to the value in the text.

If 438647;24,57,30d corresponds to 14854 synodic months then, according to Levi, \( M = 29;31,50,7,54,25,3,32d \). Accurately, this division yields \( M = 29;31,50,7,54,25,3,35,...d \).37

APPENDIX 3

Mean Synodic Month | Source
---|---
29;31,50,7,54,25,3,32d | Banū Mūsā
5,43,24,... | Brahmagupta, BSS; Yaʿqūb ibn Ṭāriq
5,43,33 | al-Ḥāshimi
5,44,33 | Ibn al-Muthannā
7,37,27,8,25 | Alfonsoine Tables (Paris)
7,53,39,49 | Bonjorn
7,54,25,3,32 | Levi ben Gerson
8,4,...* | ACT, No. 210, line 10
8,9,20 | al-Hajjāj, Copernicus, etc.
8,9,20,13 | al-Bīrūnī
8,9,24 | Ibn Yūnus, al-Bīṭrūjī
8,20 | System B, Ptolemy (Alm.), Jewish cal., etc.
8,48,...* | Ptolemy (Plan. hyp.)
18,... | Geminus

*phantom?
Acknowledgements

I have greatly benefited from discussions of matters related to this paper with J. P. Britton, L. Brack-Bernsen, J. Chabás, B. van Dalen, Y. T. Langermann, J. L. Mancha, F. Rochberg, J. M. Steele, and N. M. Swerdlow. A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Workshop on Babylonian Astronomy in honour of Asger Aaboe’s eightieth birthday that took place at Brown University in June 2002.

REFERENCES


3. For the mean value of column G (in uš) in System B that yields the length of the mean synodic month, see O. Neugebauer, Astronomical cuneiform texts [henceforth ACT] (3 vols, London, 1955), i, 78. The standard value, 29;31,50,8,20d, occurs in this form in Text No. 210, line 6 (ibid., i, 272) but, as far as I can tell, it does not occur in any other published Babylonian text. Neugebauer also identified a Greek papyrus that contains a fragment of an ephemeris according to System B (including column G) which implied, among other things, that the System B value for M was available in the Greek world in its proper context: idem, “A Babylonian lunar ephemeris from Roman Egypt”, in A scientific humanist: Studies in memory of Abraham Sachs, ed. by E. Leichty et al. (Philadelphia, 1988), 301–4. For more recent treatment of this text, see A. Jones, “A Greek papyrus containing Babylonian lunar theory”, Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik, cxix (1997), 167–72.

4. Geminus, xviii.3 (Geminos, Introduction aux phénomènes, ed. and transl. by G. Aujac (Paris, 1975), 94), says that 19756d = 669m (equivalent to 6585;20d = 223m), and this relationship implies that M = 29;31,18,...d. Ptolemy also reports an 18-year period of 6585;20d and ascribes it to “the even more ancient [astronomers]”: Almagest, iv.2 (G. J. Toomer, Ptolemy’s Almagest (London, 1984), 175). See also Goldstein, “Periods” (ref. 2), 1–2.

5. Neugebauer, ACT (ref. 3), i, 272: Text No. 210, line 10.


9. Ptolemy, Almagest, iv.2; Toomer, Almagest (ref. 4), 175–6. G. J. Toomer (“Hipparchus’ empirical basis for his lunar mean motions”, Centaurus, xxiv (1981), 97–109) offers a reconstruction of Hipparchus’s methods and the eclipses he might have used to confirm the Babylonian parameter.

10. N. Copernicus, De revolutionibus, iv.4 (Nuremberg, 1543), 101v; cf. A. Aaboe, “On the Babylonian origin of some Hipparchian parameters”, Centaurus, iv (1955), 122–5; and N. M. Swerdlow


17. Babylonian Talmud, *Seder mōd ed. Tractate Rosh ha-shanah*, 25a; transl. by I. Epstein (London, 1938), 110. See also, *Pirkē de Rabbi Eliezer*; transl. by G. Friedlander (London, 1916), 43: “The total of the days of the lunar month is 29½ days, 40 minutes, and 73 parts.” The date of this Hebrew text is disputed, but a version of it was probably composed in the eighth century.


24. Cf. Stern, *Calendar* (ref. 20), 204. Note also that 1p = 0;0,0,8,20d, i.e., 1p is the difference between 29;31,50,8,20d and 29;31,50d (the value for M in the Muslim calendar).

París, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Heb. 724, 127a:21 ff.


32. For the Hebrew text, see Levi ben Gerson’s *Astronomy* (ref. 26); for the Latin text, see Mancha “Provençal version” (ref. 11), 308.


35. In fact, according to *The Times atlas of the world* (2nd edn revised, Boston, 1971), the longitude of Orange is 4°48′E and the longitude of Alexandria is 29°55′E, for a difference of 25°7′ ≈ 1:40h. The longitude of Montpellier is 3°53′E, and so it is not on the same meridian as Orange.


37. Cf. Mancha, “Provençal version” (ref. 11), 308.