
Chapter 6

'Abdallah b. Salam: Egypt, Late Antiquity and Islamic Sainthood

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1. "Egypt" – The Arabs and Early Islam

The general interest with Islam among those who theorised its position with respect to the genealogy of modernity lies with the so called "classical heritage." This question which Franz Rosenthal (1992) pursued in greater detail was inherited from the German or German educated Orientalists like Ignaz Goldziher and C.H. Becker, H.H. Schaeder and later of course in America from G.E. von Grunebaum. Rosenthal speaks of "Fortleben" (survival) which rather seeks for continuities than for Islamic reconstructions based on classical ideas.

If one focuses on the importance of the aura of inherited religious narratives and metaphors of thought, one would ask, how far Mecca and Medina were related in their cultural worlds to the higher civilisations which surrounded the Arabian Peninsula. This includes the question, how far Muhammad and Early Islamic religious discourse were influenced by the religious ideas which were prevalent in the Hellenistic world, Gnosticism, Christianity and Judaism and Greek and Roman Philosophy and science. Both ways, Greek and Roman and at the utmost some Persian influence are considered to be predominant. So in both perspectives continuities, whether religious or philosophic, are traced as the dominant sources of later Islamic discourse.

A third dimension has recently shaped much of our perspective on Islam, this is the one on the originality of Muhammad's revelation and the type of striking effects this brought in breaking with all types of prevalent cultural constructions. There is more and more convincing ground that the language of revelation in a lost time and location had in itself a stunning revolutionary effect (Ammann 2001). It should be noted, indeed, that this later view comes close to the self-perceived idea of Arabs, acknowledging "that their race did not share in philosophy, although they surpassed other nations in rhetoric and poetry" (El-Elwany 1957: 1).

As is with all religions, the myth seems to have been the important ideological motive, not logic or philosophy. The predominant myths in Central Arabia, if not deriving from bare Arab Tribal History, depended largely on Ancient Judaism and Pharaonism.

This is where I would maintain that “Egypt” figures as a sort of hidden inner pattern of constructions in Early Islamic narrations, re-phrasing something which was since long a subject of Christian dogmatic discourse, namely in that – in contrast to Jewish, Greek and Roman perceptions – the Christians, and perhaps here lies the specific importance of the Alexandrian school, engaged in a strong dialogue, if not in a sometimes latent state of heretic prosecution,¹ with old Egyptian culture.

The first wave of Islamic conquests (632-641) of Palestine, Syria and Egypt secured the domination over largely Hellenised areas (Rosenthal 1992: 2). It is generally assumed that the Arabs being separated from the dominated populations in language and religion, largely opposed, or neglected any knowledge of predominant local cultural traits, imposing their own language and religion as the ruling pattern. They only later fell at hand to the pre-eminence of the achievements of the higher civilisation (ibid.).

That Egypt was also a very important place at the roots of Hellenism is not only due to Alexander’s conquests and his foundation of Alexandria. Many Greek scholars had travelled to Egypt, students of Pythagoras living there and Plato spending some time among them before going to Sicily and then returning to Athens (Rosenthal 1992: 28). Egypt was the must of great Greek scholars to visit Egypt (ibid.).

The more general problem, however, which relates to Early Islam, is the one of the rise of monotheism and the problem in which relation the prophetic revelations of Muhammad stand with the monotheistic forerunners, Judaism and Christianity. We may argue, that, if not for the immediate preaching of Muhammad, then for the later evolving dogmatic discourse, Islam was dependent on these prevalent religions. “Egypt” was of great importance for any evolving monotheistic discourse. Certainly, if we place the birth of Islam fully in a “native North-Arabian prophetic tradition,” a “native monotheistic tradition,” then it will be impossible to think of any cross-culture-contact discourse in relation to “Egypt,” as appears from Gibb (1978: 26-7).

In fact, Gibb’s general idea was, that Muhammad out of a certain resentment as a prophet with his antecedents Moses and Jesus, “went back behind both to the figure of Abraham ‘the Hanif’” (ibid.: 31). Here, I wish to put some doubt on Gibb’s perception that “Islam appeared, not as a new religion, but as a revival of pure Abrahamic monotheism, purified at once of the accretions of Judaism and Christianity and superseding them as the final revelation” (ibid.: 32).

1 I should admit that Karlheinz Deschner’s “Kriminalgeschichte” and specifically his Chapters on Kyrill and Schenute of Alexandria remain stimulating and revealing in this respect (Deschner 1988: 156-212).

2. The question of Egypt in Late Antiquity and the rise of Islam

There is general agreement that in the rise of Europe and the West – as Brague (2002: 27) takes it from Paul Valéry – Rome, Greece and Christianity were made the basic sources of European self-understanding. Whether in this view “Israel,” the “sub-basement in the Old Testament,” includes Egypt remains doubtful. In focussing the case of an Egyptian saint, I wish, here, to raise some very hypothetical questions with respect to “Egypt” and its cultural and political influence in Late antiquity, including the question of its possible effects on Early Islamic religious and social developments.

There is rising awareness of the modern intricacies of Egypt’s impact on Judaism and Christianity (cf. Assmann 1997; Said 2003). However, when it comes to Islam, and specifically to the first 200 years of Islamic developments, Egypt’s impact on Islamic history appears to be less than a black spot on the cultural landscape. This is partly due to the fact that the mainstream literature – after the *futūh*, the Arab conquest – is primarily concerned with the emerging sectarian tendencies in Islam and with the historiography of the related political clashes or with the – often very closely related – issue of tradition and theology and its sources. Since the scene for these clashes was largely limited to the Arab core regions on the peninsula as well as in Palestine, Syria and Iraq, the “Egyptian” affairs and their potential influences were beyond the mainstream interest, naturally because, obviously, also there was a limited amount of sources.

There are recently – perhaps not just recently, however, recently with greater vigour – some new perspectives opened on the subject. I do hope, as my point is related to the modern significance of a Jewish convert in early Islam and a witness of Mohammad as a Prophet, to raise some questions with respect to positioning of Islam and ‘Egypt’ in an axial age perspective and monotheist breakthroughs.

First of all, certainly, the issue of Egypt widens the perspective into a much broader area of interest, namely, the question of the comparative or even interactive narration of a shared idea of the golden, however, now darkened and suppressed arch-culture of the Nile. It is not possible to follow this up here, however we should note, that Alexandrian philosophy and theology in the third and fourth century, indeed, became strongly involved in finding solutions to the immediacy of the old world of Egyptian Gods. New sublime constructions of symbols and ideas were developed. However, in terms of lifestyle, health, marketing, and solutions to everydayness by way of “sacred tourism,” the old ritual places seem to have been alive in the 6th and 7th century as much as they have been before.

With respect to Early Islam, the question of break and continuity was recently again put in terms of “radical singularity” and “total alterity” (Cheddadi 2004). However, as “Islamwissenschaft” before, Cheddadi understands this only with respect to role and development of “scripture” in Early Islam. However, we know

too little about the interactive process of emerging ideas and the changes and continuities in religious instincts, style of life and mentality. In general, this idea of the totally other and new was always linked to Muhammad's revelation and his personal abilities in life and the simplicity of his message of men of all ranks and colours standing equal judgement in front of an un-attainable God.

On the other hand, certainly, the perspective on "singularity" and "alterity" always included the question, to what does all this refer, to whom does it speak, what does it deny, from where does it depart? From this angle, it seems to me, that there is an alternative to absolute break and abrupt change in that the ideas of origin gained the power of an umbrella not only through political and military strength, but rather gradually took shape in being exposed to a dialogical process with and within the cultures in the occupied territories over a period of 150 years. To be sure, the issue of "Egypt" at that time – if ever – had not ended.

The idea of the retarded fixation of scripture and Islamic style never fully and never materially engaged with what Christianity, what Judaism, what Hellenism meant in terms of material life and life perspectives and cultural instincts of people in the 7th and 8th century.

This later question of popular instincts, psychology and life-perspective emerges as a very important one, it is a question which goes far beyond "text" and the problematic of what we have to treat as more or less authentic sources of Islam. The cultic practice, the local mediatic relation to cults, and what the situation was in the different pre-existing religions in treating cultic necessities, seems to me similarly important. It is interesting to mention in this context of preludes to Islam that Peter Brown's and Ian Wood's discussions on the dramatic changes in Christian imagination in the late 6th century could be taken as evidence of the development of strong inner tensions related to rituals and their perception in popular mass contexts (Brown 1999; Wood 1999). This is in fact immanent with respect to the current problem of positioning Islam in the more general framework of developments leading to the modern processes of nation state formation, national culture and return to religion.

Certainly, Freud's Moses instigated a lively debate, reminding us of the importance of Pharaonic Egypt with respect to Judaism and Christianity. However, that monotheism should be a one way path to rationality, initiating the lead to the steady decline of superstition, has since long been doubted. The issue of "Egypt" poses a much deeper question on the effects of pre-existing local traditions. If we consider that the focus on Early Islam has been shifted, from the pure question of authenticity of sources to the question of culture contact and dialogue, then the question of "Egypt" becomes even more important. The event of Islam has to be related to these questions within the broader – if you wish – the global context of late antiquity.

Considering what Nock (1972) has called "Later Egyptian Piety" there the recurrent topic is, that Egypt in terms of culture, religion and spiritual life remained, despite the influx of Hellenism and Christianity, a world apart in Late antiquity. This peculiarity of "Egypt" as a culture undergoing strong, externally

imposed changes and foreign impingements, with continuous resistance and without any comparable depth of internal transformation, is a point well taken (cf. Fowden 1986). However, this dimension could also be reversed. The perplexity of this inner resistance, could also be made a point of cultural force influencing the spiritual, ritual and symbolic attitudes of the world outside. In this respect, I can only propose to take the works of Alfred Hermann more serious and specifically his point on the long continuities of the described “Culture of the Nile” (cf. Hermann 1960; 1959; n.d.). The narratives of this Nil-culture are still waiting to be fully recognised with respect to the developments of Hellenism, of Christianity, and of Islam. My point is that “Egypt” can hardly be understood as a world apart without effect, a world of a coherent long term internal cultural production without change and effecting change to the world outside.

Certainly, if one argues that the arrival of Islam has constituted a marking effect for the eastern Mediterranean region as a whole, the question remains what the position of Egypt is in this transformation process. What has Egypt contributed to the development of Islam, dogma, ritual, and learning? Egypt, certainly, has to be focussed as a main issue specifically in relation to the birth of monotheism and the early Christian theology. However, the emergence of Islam is a different story, and it is difficult to understand this event purely within the framework of the political and intellectual constellations of Late Antiquity. Extending the influence of Hellenism further to the South and the East could be counted just as another expression of the mode to frame out new sources of modernity and/or Islam. However, my concern is a different one, I wish to stress the dialogical patterns in the construction of monotheism, the dialogue with pre-existent Egypt and perceptions of order, in which monotheism and Islam became engaged and played the dominant role in later power and state formation in the region.

3. The ‘longue durée’ of Egyptian saints

It should be noted that ‘late antique Egypt’ is a field of highly specialised historical and archaeological research which is difficult to approach from the site of the non-specialist, the transposition of themes and results from one field to another, therefore, seems a very complicated affair. Perhaps we can gain a more solid ground on struggles over continuities and breaks in the literature on “pilgrimages” and on the early ascetics, the “saintly fathers of the desert.”

It is true, my questions arise from a background of struggles which were constitutive to the “Protestant notion of distinguishing and even polarizing an interior ‘spirituality’ from the exterior devotions and images of traditional piety” (Frankfurter 1998: 5). However, these are perhaps questions that were probably firstly raised in a radical missionary, converting in other words modern sense by early Muslims.

In looking to the different historical and dialogical conditions of the relation

between absolute monotheism and personal interiority, Egypt seems to have been preserved in the religious mind as the power of the past, combining broader concepts of Goddess with strong local ritual and symbolic practices on the one hand, and on the other hand as a direct constraint to the conceptual construction of personal piety and the idea of an abstract transcendence in early Christianity.

This is certainly true with respect to the development of theology and theological discourse and the foundation of philosophical “heresies” which then more or less became part of the cultural constructions and church development. Thus the fundamental structures of Early Christianity in Egypt have been aptly described as “the constant and vital interplay between Christianity as emerging from the cosmopolitan religiosity proper to the Hellenistic city of Alexandria and Christianity as bound to the spiritual landscape of the Nile valley (Kannengiesser 1986: 212).

Guy Stroumsa (2005) showed that Clemens of Alexandria was not only a theological enemy of the Egyptian cults, but also a spiritual integrator and in a real modern sense an ethnographer of old cultic practices. This perspective, certainly with respect to early Islam, presumes a new tenuous field of understanding: Early Christianity was as late as into its 4th century largely build on a dialogical basis of coexistence with the old Egyptian religion, local cults and symbolic worlds.

One becomes even more assured of a potentially hidden role of “Egypt” in this double-sided construction of monotheism, including the event of Islam, in considering Dominic Montserrat’s observations of the “pilgrimage to the shrine of SS Cyrus and John at Menouthis in late antiquity” (1986: 256-279). These are specifically revealing the local tensions specifically about saintly places, the shrines of the saints, showing “that the status and development of the shrine is closely tied up with religious controversies that troubled Egypt between the early fifth and the mid-seventh century CE” and that “the shrine certainly survived the depredations of the Persians in around 618 CE and seems to have been functioning after Egypt became Muslim”(ibid.: 259). Montserrat speaks of the “coexistence of the pagan and Christian” interpretation of the “divine place” of Menouthis until the mid-seventh century. However, Montserrat makes also clear, that the veneration at Menouthis, northeast of Alexandria, and specifically its form, interpretation and administration was strongly linked to the political and theological discourse in Alexandria, now however about two hundred years after Clemens.

This tendency that a certain revival of old Egyptian cults could be observed even after six hundred years of spread of Christianity, could be affirmed if one looks to evidence gathered by Volokhine, namely showing that coptic shrines were often displaced back to old places of veneration for either Isis or Osiris in the 6th and 7th century and that there seems to have operated a sort of “Zeitgeist” of re-inventing the powers of ancient gods within a framework of Christendom. These movements, obviously, were related to the emerging theological debates,

secterian struggles and ascetic communities. It is within this framework, that we can today gain some ground for understanding the Egyptian continuities. Certainly, “Egypt” did not end after the destruction of the Serapeum in Alexandria in 391. Volokhine argues that the motivation for a reinspiration of old places of temples through Christian pilgrimage was based on functional grounds with respect to aspirations of good health, marketing, and everyday needs. There was a reinvention of oracles in Christian terms even in the 7th and 8th century which only, according to Volokhine was ended with the advent of Islam (Volokhine 1998: 96)²

There are two questions unanswered with respect to this evidence: First, it seems that there remains something incomplete in Monosyphism which the teaching of Muhammad attempts to come to grips with. Could one say that the early Muslims stand in direct connection with the idea of Monosyphist rejections of cult sublimation, or, more directly that Early Islam poses a sort of solution to the Monosyphist struggles in ending the cultic reality of late antiquity. Second, and directly related to the first question, one could ask how far the Christian theological discourse – with “Egypt” as its subject – had influenced the theological discourse in Early Islam. Is Early Islam the main event of the definite end of “Egypt” in late antiquity?

A different angle could be traced. With the Muslim conquest of Egypt, the fact is that while the Alexandrian Christians were involved in highly sophisticated religious, theological and factional political quarrels, the Muslims advanced their forces. If Alfred Butler, in an early attempt of simultaneous reading of Byzantine and Arabic sources is right, the fall of Byzantine rule in Egypt given its enormous structural and military superiority was largely due to an irresolvable struggle between Egyptian Coptic and Byzantine theological schools, the later holding worldly power, the earlier maintaining old beliefs and practices. According to Butler, there was, however, no Coptic betrayal, but internal ideological confusion that caused the final defeat in front of the Muslims. In the period of the last ten years before the Arab intrusion of Egypt Cyrus, Governor and Patriarch of Egypt, al-Muqauqas, persecuted perniciously the Copts of Egypt. This persecution was directed against both, the continuity of the practice of ven-

- 2 Volokhine writes here: “La motivation qui préside aux déplacements vers les temples concerne des soucis courants, et non pas une quête des salut : la santé, la bonne marche des affaires, le quotidien. Dans cette mesure, le développement des oracles, le recours aux dieux sauveurs, sont significatifs. Comme le remarquait J. Cerny, la teneur des pétitions écrites en grec adressées aux oracles correspond aux demandes égyptiennes; de même, les papyrus coptes du VIIe ou du VIIIe siècle confirment que la pratique de l’oracle ne disparaît pas avec le paganisme. On s’adressait à Sérapis, à Sobek: on s’adresse à présent au dieu chrétien. L’Islam seul mettra fin à des millénaires de pratique. De même, on ne verra pas forcément de césure entre l’époque païenne et chrétienne en ce qui concerne les habitudes de déplacements vers les sanctuaires.”

eration at local Egyptian cultic places as much as of the anti-Chalcedonian theological Elite (Butler 1978: 168-206). It should be said – and very strikingly so it was – that on the side of the Muslims no word of religion or religious quarrel can be traced, (certainly apart of one all embracing word: *Allahu akbar*) in negotiations with the patriarchal powers. Here, it is very interesting to see, the absence of religious language in formulating the treaties of surrender first of Babylon and then of Alexandria (Butler 1978: 256-274, 318-327). There is this anecdote of the encounter and negotiations of Cyrus, the Archbishop and ‘Ubâdah b. as-Sâmit, a powerful Negro who was earlier in close relation to Muhammad and later quite involved in the religious party-struggle between Mu‘awiya, first “Meccan Calif,” and the Ansâr, the Medinan followers of Muhammad (van Ess 2001: 248-259). ‘Ubâdah is far from indulging on religious terms. Religious is, if anything far from theology, the simplicity of expression of this black Muslim confronting the Alexandrian Archbishop who refused to negotiate with a black man: “There are a thousand blacks, as black as myself, among our companions. I and they would be ready each to meet and fight a hundred enemies together. We live only to fight for God, and to follow His will. We care not for wealth, so long as we have wherewithal to stay our hunger and to clothe our bodies. This world is not to us, the next world is all” (Butler 1978: 257).

Can we say that perhaps the one-dimensional simplicity in advertising their religion in these early times of conquest, in fact, delivered the basis on which both the Christian parties could see a way for themselves to view the future? Was this future, indeed, a sort of continuation of the theological debate on the back of the simplicity and clarity of the original Islamic message?

The point of Early Islam confronting Egypt and the Egyptian Christians, leave aside the philosophically inclined Jewish community in Alexandria, seems to be one of military straightforwardness and theological simplicity. Certainly, Fowden’s idea, that “Islam offered not just an umbrella political regime which protected all those who acknowledged a revealed scripture, but also a strictly monotheist doctrine of God which gave renewed energy to discussions seemingly stalled for ever in the hardened ruts of the Christianological controversies” (Fowden 2005: 10), is well taken. Perhaps from here we can understand, that “Egypt” in Early Islam seems to have been reduced to the practices related to the Qisas al-Anbiyâ, the wide spread popular practice of narratives of the prophets and old Egyptian topics, while only in medieval Islam and from there on, pilgrimages and the veneration of local saints took a fully new shape in Islamic terms.

Taking these dimensions into account, we will be able to view the case of a Jewish man, who was conversant with Jewish myths and legends of the prophets, and an important witness for Muhammad to stand in their tradition. Conversing to Islam he became a pillar of orthodox monotheism, and possibly through his imaginative and magic stories being made part of the Islamic Tradition, he also entered into the broad field of practices related to popular story telling, even after

the taste for popular legends of the prophets had faded. He now survives in the memory of people as a strongly venerated saint in the district of Mansura in the north-eastern Nile Delta.

4. ‘Abdallah b. Salam: the early Jewish convert and Egyptian saint

The case that I wish to develop in the following pages stands in a mediating position between “Late Antiquity” and Islam: ‘Abdallah b. Salam is the first Jewish companion to the Prophet Muhammad, he was a well educated Jew with deep genealogical traits in a clan of priests and scholars, he converted to Islam in 622 AD when Muhammad arrived in Medina. He later was an advisor to the Caliphs Umar, Uthman and Mu‘awiya and is considered a pillar of early orthodoxy. Second the way in which he is venerated today and since an unknown number of centuries is important. He has his main places of veneration at sites with relics of the Pharaonic past. There, his sainthood seems to have been constructed and re-constructed in relation with his testifying Islamic monotheism as against performing non-Islamic traditions. However, his legends – obviously transmitted by way of local Sufi channels – also entail references to Pharaonic and Jewish material. We should note that he was probably the first Jewish convert to Islam in Medina.

This case is significant with respect to how Islam in a perspective of long duration has dealt with the non-Islamic. This implies the specific story of the impact of monotheism on local beliefs, the construction and maintenance of sacred places and the ambivalent treatment of local beliefs by the orthodoxy and in recent years by often insurgent reformist Salafi-groups.

4.1 Topography and essence

A critical description of historical and symbolic arrangements of the saint necessitates a view on the geography and topography of his places³.

In general, saintly places are the places of the dead. The ambiguity of genealogical nearness to the sites of the Ancients is quite common practice in both Islam and Christianity. Christians have often built the churches for their patrons on grave yards and cult places of the Romans, similarly the Muslim Saints in the Nile Delta are often very close to the Pharaonic places or places of Egyptian antiquity in general. The religious theory of saintly places dating back to Ernest

3 More detailed description of three places in the Mansura-region are presented in Stauth (2005), *Ägyptische Heilige Orte I: Konstruktionen, Inszenierungen und Landschaften der Heiligen im Nildelta: ‘Abdallah b. Salam*. Bielefeld: transcript.

Renan, therefore, strongly claimed that humanity prayed always at the same places. We may say so, that there is nothing special about 'Abdallah b. Salam having his place close or on top of a Tell, as the Egyptians call those red and brown mounds of ruins of antiquity, rising up from the dark or green regularly inundated moulds of Delta agricultural land. However, remaining in the – potentially misleading – first glance perspective of geography and Topography, here, the question turns to the fact that 'Abdallah b. Salam who is the most prominent figure among early Jewish converts to Islam, has not only one, but many places in this region which was a region of Jewish settlement and in the Late Dynastic Period had witnessed many invasions of “Asian” people. In the larger context of the Nile Delta today huge metropolitan cities, relating to times before the Hyksos and settling Jews, have been found (the admirable work of Edgar Pusch and his crew in Qantir seems to find too little support by his colleagues in this respect). It is astonishing that in other regions no places of 'Abdallah are to be found. Here, in the the Daqahliyya province with the city of Mansura as its centre the saying goes that 'Abdallah has more than 3, some say 13, some 39, some 40 places. As I said, it potentially misleading to give this local fixation an over-essential meaning with respect to history. However, 'Abdallah, connected with Early Islam, the latest of the revealed monotheistic religions, and with Judaism, the first of the religions of monotheism, puts him in a very ambiguous historical place which reminds us that the idea of the one God rose as an idea which became influential in various cultic and ethnic communities and even nations and, indeed, this region was one of culture contact since the early days of human history.

However, from what follows it will become clear, that any attempt to explain the local importance of 'Abdallah from the angle of continuity of Jewish settlement will fail. There is strong evidence that 'Abdallah' was, first, perhaps in the 18th century, a place of a tribal leader who was buried near the Tell. Gradually, perhaps in the course of intensive veneration there emerged the need of official orthodox recognition and the place was named and venerated as the one of 'Abdallah b. Salam, the pillar of Orthodoxy in Early Islam. His Jewish origin was potentially later linked with the Tell in local legends among the Fellaheen who also called and still call the Tell today: “Tell” or “*qasr bint al-yahudi*” (castle of the daughter of the Jew). However, putting 'Abdallah b. Salam, the Jew and the Muslim saint, and his location, into the one-dimensional essentialist track of a functional and mono-causal explanation, would be misleading again. And I have described in greater detail that nothing is definite with respect to the local arrangements, religious functions and symbolic productions of this saint and in his relation to the collective memory and religious history of monotheism. Nevertheless, the case itself symbolises the very type of constructions and antagonisms which are historically linked with the local presence of Islam and its need of strengthening of monotheism as places, practises, and ideas of the Ancient past. At the same time for today it is important to note, that against and within

modernist streams of Islam, the place turns to be continuously rearranged and adapted among local people and followers of 'Abdallah.

Beyond the essentialism of topography, 'Abdallah b. Salam (d. 43 H.) is a Jewish and later Islamic scholar who converted to Islam at Muhammad's arrival in Medina. He has many saintly places in Daqahliyya, the region of the Egyptian provincial capital al-Mansura in the eastern part of the Nile Delta. These places are considered to be his tombs, although in fact nobody – perhaps except the children of the village – would believe in the saint to be really buried here. A saint has his place (*maqam*), indeed, and venerating him here, does not necessarily mean the testified physical presence of his dead body or of any of his relics. This does not challenge the idea of his immediate presence at the place and the veneration of one saint at different places is quite normal practice (Goldziher 1968: 71; Franke 2004). 'Abdallah b. Salam's case, however, is significant in that he has many Maqams just in one specific region with ample proof that he never physically has been in Egypt. He is extraordinary with his Maqams being distributed in this specific north-eastern part of the Nile Delta. The case seems to be unparalleled in the literature, because he is a historical figure of the early days of Islam in Medina, Jerusalem and southern Syria, however, his fantastic presence as a saint is reserved to this specific region in the eastern Delta.

Goldziher took Ka'b al-Ahbar, a contemporary of 'Abdallah b. Salam and a Jewish convert like him, to whom Egyptians have given a place of veneration in Cairo. He considered him as an example for this Egyptian habit to venerate an "absent" saint (cf. Muh. Stud. II, 336-343). This "Egyptian habit," however, does not help to answer our question: Why is 'Abdallah b. Salam, one of the first Jewish converts to Islam venerated in this specific province of Egypt, why is he venerated at so many places in this province, and why – to our knowledge – is he not venerated at any other place in rural or urban Egypt? Here, the question of the "place" of the saint quickly turns into the many questions related to Egypt, Islam, monotheism and the construction of modernity. Certainly, the starting question is how the local conditions of "memory" relate to the historical and symbolic forms of constructing the Saintly. However, in a much broader sense, I think, this case certainly includes the question about the prophetic traditions and early dialogue in the construction of monotheism and its significance for cross-civilizational dialogue today.

4.2 'Abdallah b. Salam – the historical figure

This observation with 'Abdallah b. Salam's places reveals that the appearance of historical relics is linked to the fight of Islamic monotheism against continuities or survivals or reinventions of the Ancients. This is also the present function of this saint and his shrines. Islamology knows generally nothing about his role as a contemporary local saint in Egypt. Islamology presents 'Abdallah through the eyes of history and literary books confirming his factual existence in Islamic

sources, mainly the *maghazi*- and *hadith*-Literature. A sort of change in paradigm can be noted, however, in a recent study by Josef van Ess, who actually visited the place of his scholar/saint, the Maqam of Mu'adh b. Gabal in El-Ekseir near al-Hamma in Jordan (van Ess 2001: 365) and took note of a place of the same person in Cairo (ibid.: 376). As will be noted in greater detail below, this is an astonishing exception of an Islamic philologist's modern recognition of a companion of the Prophet as a contemporary saint (van Ess 2001: 359-380). Certainly, van Ess here opens a new landscape for the study of the modern significance of early Islamic history. My own contention is sociological, i.e. limited and simple and to a great extent reductionist: 'Abdallah b. Salam b. al- Harith the person and modern saint will be presented here only in terms of a short summary of his biography: His original name in the time before his conversion was al- Husayn from the Banu Qaynuqa'. He died in 43 H. (664) in Medina. His fame is linked to his "Questions to the Prophet," provoking answers by the Prophet which – as reported were so convincing for him that he converted to Islam. It is also reported that the Islamic tradition gives him great importance, because 'Abdallah belonged to a group of a few Jews who converted and stood with the Prophet and while many of them charged Muhammad with ignorance of the old testament versions of his time, it seems to have been 'Abdallah who may have acknowledged the fact to which Ilse Lichtenstaedter points, namely that Muhammad "in the early times of his mission [...] was not telling Biblical stories; he was dipping deep into the reservoir of Ancient Near Eastern myth from which those Biblical stories themselves had originally arisen" (Lichtenstaedter 1976: 38). It was, obviously, 'Abdallah the specialist of "ancient myth" who identified Muhammad as a specialist in this very field. Not the factual, i.e. textual, but the mythological knowledge led to the recognition of Muhammad as the true and announced Prophet in the line of the ancient Near Eastern religious tradition.

Taking these terms of understanding, 'Abdallah's questions were only to be answered by a Jewish Prophet. As Horowitz tells us, the contents of the Hadiths which figure under 'Abdallah's name in the early Islamic source books and specifically the story of Buluqya, which al-Tha'labi, a well recognized traditioner, traces back to 'Abdallah b. Salam, are mostly originating from Jewish sources and even if 'Abdallah is not the author, the stories derive from the circles of Jewish converts (Horowitz EI/1, I: 32). There always seems to have been a certain uneasiness about 'Abdallah's Jewish descent, certainly among his Muslim contemporaries. However, Horowitz believes that it were traditions that were circulated later in which Muhammad affirms 'Abdallah as one of those who have a secure place in paradise or in which is stated that certain verses of the Qur'an relate to 'Abdallah b. Salam. Fuat Sezgin maintains that the "Questions" of 'Abdallah were later expanded to whole books and other writings which seem to paraphrase the stories which are contained in the Hadith-source books. "He was one of the first converts and had great knowledge of the Jewish tradition of the world history and the early Prophets etc. (Sezgin 1967, I: 304). The *Masa'il* were later

translated into Latin and circulated as *Doctrina Mahumet* and *Theologia Mahometis* in late medieval Europe (Bobzin 1995: 50, 332; Kritzeck 1964: 89-96). According to the sources 'Abdallah was accompanying 'Umar the second Caliph in his raids to Jabiya and Jerusalem. Possibly this relates also to his function as a potential missionary of Jews and we may suspect that his "*Kitab Masa'il Sidi 'Abdallah*" (Sezgin *ibid.*) points into this direction. In the following struggles for the Caliphate 'Abdallah b. Salam stood firm with 'Uthman, the third Calif. There are reports that he was present when 'Uthman was murdered, however, could not prevent the murder. Later he was a follower of the Caliph Mu'awiya. Perhaps his later importance in Sufi circles derives from his mythological stories about the old traditions of the Prophets and Muhammads own prophecy, the *qissas annabawi*, which often combine old Jewish themes with old Pharaonic materials (Horovitz 1901). As said above many such stories – like the one of Buluqya – also appear in the oldest *maghazi-* and *hadith-*books, Qur'an-commentaries and world histories (Sezgin 1967, I: 304). Brockelmann refers to the *Kitab fi 'Azamat Allah wa mahluqatih* of Abu Muh. 'Aal. B. M. Ja'far b. Haiyan b. ash-Shaikh al-Isphahani (d. 979), who "in the introduction refers to 'Al. B. as-Sallam his using the writings of Daniel, which he took from the tables of Adam preserved in Serendib (Ceylon; Berlin 6159)" (Brockelmann 1942, I: 209). 'Abdallah's main sources in tradition seem to have been such famous authorities like Abu Hurayra and Anas b. Malik (EI/2, I: 52).

This is in short a summary of textual biography of 'Abdallah b. Salam. There is no reference to his veneration as an Egyptian saint. However, it should be noted that his Maqams, which we visited, assemble – in different forms and with different ways of giving importance – a variety of writings taken from religious sources. It would need a very specific analysis to work out in detail these textual representations, and I certainly do encourage the specialists in early Islamic philology to do so. In the following, I will only refer to them in as much they are of interest for the questions which I am developing here.

5. 'Abdallah b. Salam with a view on his pre-Islamic stories and legends

A new "reality" of the historical existence of 'Abdallah b. Salam seems to emerge if we leave the today existing Maqams and the local entourage and enter – with some sociological restraint indeed – into the world of texts. In fact, we have no clear cut understanding of the historical figure: Was he a religious scholar, a specialist in religious mythology, a politico-religious convert and then a missionary? As we showed it is not unusual to have one and the same saint at various places and even at places where he in historical reality never could have been. However, what makes this saint so unusual is the very different character of his local functioning: a variety of "appearances" in one and the same region of

the Delta: we may call this a very normal phenomenon of “translocality.” However, once we turn to the realm of texts we may state that the question what makes this saint so important and meaningful in this local context gains quite a different turn. ‘Abdallah never was in Egypt and so he had no immediate impact on the Arab Conquest of Egypt, the Futuh. However, even if the signs for his historical physical presence are nil, we may uphold the question of a potential inner historical relationship of ‘Abdallah b. Salam to his places in Mendes/Manzala. This is merely hypothetical, and we take ‘Abdallah’s local fictionality only as a point of strategic interest, delimiting our textual investigations

First, there are his miracle-stories and legends which are of interest: As mentioned above, ‘Abdallah b. Salam has a name as author of such stories in the early Islamic literary history and it is important to know that such stories of the old prophets and wonders played and until today play an important role in both the local Sufi culture and the popular tradition (Horowitz 1901; Sezgin 1967, I, 304). In his little note on the story of Buluqiya, Horowitz refers to a story of ‘Abdallah b. Salam in ath-Tha’labi’s *qisas al-anbiya* (Horowitz 1901: 519; ath-Tha’labi 1325/1907-8). The early schools of interpretation of Qur’an, responding to questions about historical events which were only vaguely referred to in the Qur’an were often influenced by recent converts who with their knowledge of the Torah were able to answer them. Thus the early Christian or Jewish converts often functioned to explain certain contradictions in naming the event in the history of the early Prophets for example. This is also clearly a reference to the fact that so many biblical and pseudo-biblical material was assembled in the Hadith, narratives of the old religious history with a quite often irrational, miraculous and fictional character. These narratives were often refused by orthodox authorities and modern reformists (Jansen 1980: 27).

The story of Buluqiya belongs to this genre which combines in metaphor and content the myths of pre-Islamic history with the stories of miracles of the Prophets and historical facts. Certainly, the stories also had a certain effect in religious propaganda since they were aimed at a foundational genealogy of the Prophet Muhammad in the line of the old prophets of the Thorah. The story of Buluqiya is a fantastic story which assembles historical and geographical names, however, in a way that remains vague and unrealistic, where factual details turn out to be of a purely metaphorical nature. We may – in line with our modest sociological interests – refer to the story here, only based on Horowitz’ presentation. Perhaps, we can trace out, here, three separate dimensions of “reality” as represented in the story’s mythological and metaphorical return to the past:

1. Jews in Egypt: The story mentions a certain “King of the Banu Isra’il in Egypt.” This is not to reflect in the very sense of “reality” the Jewish presence in Egypt. However, as much as the “real” history of this presence takes a very fictional character, we may only refer to it in a very “loose” way: The story of Jewish settlement always relates to the sons of Jacob in the land of Goshen which only recently is re-identifies with Pithom or Patoumos, today Tell Maskhuta

(Retsö 2003: 250 f.) in the southeast of the Delta (Wadi Tumat). In what archeologists have attempted to trace as this presence of the Jews remains – when it comes to “real” places – very vague (Hoffmeier 1996: 107-134; Bietak 1986). Adding to the confusion would be to take the story of Ka’b al-Ahbar, (transmitted through ath-Tha’labi/Qisa’i) as “real” which – as local peasants in the Fayyum until today do locate the treasure of Salomon in the lake of Qarun – speaks of the treasure in the “lake” and as reported thus refers to the fact that the Fayyum was always as the settlement of the descendents of Josef resembling a wrong but nevertheless until today in Egypt vital Jewish tradition story, that the land Goshen was located in the Fayyum (Wolfensohn 1933: 81).

2. Torah and Muhammad: The Buluqya-story of ‘Abdallah b. Salam also refers to a “book” in which the appearance of the Prophet Muhammad was announced and his personality was described: the Torah. This is obviously referring to similar traditions as transmitted in Ibn Hisham’s *Sira* (live story) of the Prophet: ‘Abdallah b. Salam is reported to state to the Jews of Medina: “You know, that Muhammed is the messenger of God, you find his name written in the Taurat and dedcribed” (Ibn Hisham 1860: 353/2002: 240). Interestingly enough, we find today this Hadith being part of the collection of sources on ‘Abdallah b. Salam at his mausoleum in the village Kafr al-Amir ‘Abdallah b. Salam south of Mansura.

3. Myths and metaphors of Pharaonic Egypt: The story refers metaphorically to the thematic of an old Egyptian fairy tale of the “shipwrecked seaman” which is also present in Flinders-Petrie’s “Egyptian Tales” (1st series, pp. 88) to which Horowitz (1901: 519) refers. This includes an old thematic of the queen of the snakes which embraces the movement of jinn and snakes with reference to ancient Egypt. Miracles and the powers of magic are often related to some types of references to old Egyptian cultic metaphors and the secrets of the temples in later medieval literature (e.g. U. Sezgin 1994: 12-17). According to Fuat Sezgin there also exists a manuscript (Paris 2954, pp. 113-116) including some magics and amulettes of ‘Aballah b. Salam (Sezgin 1967: 304). Mohamad el-Gawhary (1968: 51-54) mentions that specifically the early Jewish converts like Ka’b al-Ahbar and ‘Abdallah b. Salam were often referred to in the works of al-Buni (st. 622 H./1225 AD.) when dealing with the names of God used in magic. We may wonder whether the metaphor used in the following Hadith of ‘Abdallah b. Salam concerning the arrival of the Prophet in Medina engages with another metaphoric allusion: “a man came with the message of his arrival when I was working in the top of a palm tree and my aunt Khalida bt. Al-Harith was sitting below” (Ibn Hisham 1860: 353/2002: 241). The layer of later reference to ‘Abdallah b. Salam in Islamic literature referring to Pharaonic culture seems to explain also his popularity when it comes to jinn and magic. In nucleus we may see here also a different dimension namely the powerful missionary who is able to deal with such practices, a function which could relate directly to his official position in orthodox Islam since his participation in the conquest of Palestine and Syria.

6. Early Islamic knowledge: translating biblical legends and Qur'anic myths

Obviously this later point of the missionary, discursive and psychological power of this saint and his potentially significant role as “translator” and “accountant” of the old Jewish and the Pharaonic myths and legends in the context of the “birth” of Islam and Islamic theology is significant with respect to his image as a pillar of orthodox wisdom. As much as Pharaonic stories, metaphors and histories flourished still in medieval times, as much, however, they were also subject to suppression by religiously inclined people (Haarmann 1978: 371). Nevertheless, the orthodox tradition gave 'Abdallah b. Salam a great intellectual and spiritual position as one of the *al-'urwa al-wuthqa*, the category of steadily trustful believers (Dhahabi, Tadhkirat, I, 26, see also Ibn Sa'd II, pp. 352). 'Abdallah has put his weight on serious religious ground and his position among the early commentators of Qur'an seems unquestioned:

“Unter den bevorzugten Belehrungsquellen des Ibn 'Abbas finden wir vielfach die jüdischen Konvertiten Ka'b al-Ahbar (Ibn Sa'd VII/1, 161, 15 ff.) und 'Abdallah b. Salam, sowie im allgemeinen Ahl al-Kitab, also Leuten aus Klassen, vor deren Mitteilungen sonst auch in Sprüchen, die auf Ibn 'Abbas selbst zurückgeführt sind, gewarnt wird. Nicht mit Unrecht warnt Loth vor der jüdisch gefärbten Schule des Ibn al-'Abbas” (Goldziher 1952: 67).

(Among the favorable sources of learning of Ibn 'Abbas we often find the Jewish converts Ka'b al-Ahbar (Ibn Sa'd VII/1, 161, 15 pp.) and 'Abdallah b. Salam, as well as in general traditions from Ahl al-Kitab, people of such strata, the traditions of which even with respect to those which are transmitted from Ibn 'Abbas were otherwise doubted. Loth does not unjustly refer to the Jewish flavoured school of Ibn 'Abbas.)

Another respected commentator of the school of Ibn al-'Abbas is Mujahid b. Jabr, who often quotes 'Abdallah b. Salam as the witness for the Qur'anic verse: “*wa shahida shahidun min bani isra'il 'ala mithlihi*”: qala Mujahid: ismuha 'Abdallah b. Salam (Ibn Sa'd (1985, II: 353, see also adh-Dhahabi, Tadhkirat al-Huffaz, I, 26). Mujahid was well respected among the orthodoxy “weil er sich von den Ahl al-Kitab belehren ließ” (because he was informed by the Ahl al-Kitab” (Ibn Sa'd V, 344; Wolfensohn 1933: 37).

Another Hadith refers to 'Abdallah b. Salam as a very eager convert, it goes back to 'Abdallah b. 'Umar: 'Abdallah b. Salam insisted – against his own former brothers in the Jewish religion – that the tradition of stoning goes back to the real text of the Torah to be considered as Law, this insisting then lead to the death of a young couple punished for adultery. 'Abdallah b. Salam through this episode belongs to the history of introducing of stoning as Punishment in Islam (cf. Ibn Hisham 2002: 241 ff.; Mingana n.d.). It is quite symptomatic that this episode – as a quick view to the respective pages of the internet shows – plays an important role in inter-religious discourse until today.

A subtle background for the otherwise orthodox refuse to fully acknowledge the Jewish converts (e.g. van Ess 2001: 79) seems to refer to the general hostility of the Jews towards the new Prophet: “l’ostilità degli Ebrei,” because Muhammad was not a Jew “fosse generata dall’invidia, perché Dio non aveva preferito di mandare un Profeta ebraico. L’opposizione degli Ebrei sia un travisamento dei fatti e che il motivo fondamentale fosse invece soprattutto politico” (Caetani 1905, I: 413, fn 1).

Similar reactions are vital until today in modern Egyptian interpretations of the Qur’an most notably by Rashid Rida, who opposed the “Isra’iliyat,” the Hadiths originating from early converts and speaks of false traditions which were fabricated to undermine Islam (vgl. Jansen 1980: 27). The Isra’iliyat, the “traditions and reports that contain elements of the legendary and religious literature of the Jews,” as Juynboll (1969: 121) tells us, found always a very ambiguous reception among orthodox scholars. However, it should be noted that despite the motive of Queen of the Snake in the Buluqya-story for example, ‘Abdallah b. Salam was well praised by Rashid Rida (Juynboll 1969: 129). This is astonishing, because otherwise it is known that “Rida contended that all the stories woven around the snake were forgeries and belonged to the *isra’iliyat*” (Juynboll 1969: 122).

We can also learn from Ibn Khaldun how definite the refutation of the Isra’iliyat was generally by the Orthodoxy. However, it seems that all this had not affected the well-settled position of ‘Abdallah b. Salam as a figure of vigour and belief in early Islam. In Ibn Khaldun’s Muqaddima we find him being honoured as one of the refuters of Ali’s Khalifa and as one of the trustees of the Umayyads (Ibn Khaldun 1958, I: 439). However, Ibn Khaldun warned of the traditions of the biblical interpretations of the Qur’an because they “clung to the (information) they possessed, such as information about the beginning of creation and the information of the type of forecasts and predictions” (Ibn Khaldun 1958, III: 445). Nevertheless, they could also be considered “as people of rank in (their) religion and religious group” (Ibn Khaldun 1958, III: 446). Ilse Lichtstadter seems to give us a sound explanation for the interpretative role of the early converts: Muhammad “was dipping deep into the reservoir of ancient Near Eastern myth from which those Biblical stories themselves had originally arisen. Thus, these variants represent several parallel streams of myth and legend independently from this ancient well of Near Eastern mythology, gradually becoming “history.” They were identical in their underlying symbolic meaning but not in the way they were remembered and told in the various cultural and religious environments” (1976: 38). The new religion, therefore, had its own necessities to explain the differences between knowledge of text and knowledge of myth. In fact, there was the need to close the gap due to the historical break with traditions and myth. However, at the same time there arose the necessity to stabilize the sense for cultural continuity and to mobilize it in a missionary sense, or even of instrumentalizing the images and symbols of continuity for the religious metaphoric and mentality of the masses.

Wolfensohn clearly shows that the prophetic stories, deriving from the Isra'iliyat were – in opposition to their refutation by the orthodoxy – already in the first century Hijra – a mass phenomenon. The popular story tellers (qas, pl. qussas), and re-interpretors, wanderers between mosques and public places attracted masses of people listening to the Qisas the mixed legends of the Qur'an and the Bible, explaining the textual discrepancies between both (Goldziher 1969, II: pp. 161). In the event of the recitation in front of a huge audience men and women were applauding the Qas intervening with questions and statements or just raising their hands as they do it until today when listening to poets and singers. The ability of quick response to questions and of inventing of “real” details was part of their profession. Certainly, confronting “the people” they were regarded as the real “scholars” and often better repudated as their rivals the scholars of profession and of disciplinary studies (Goldziher 1969: II, 167). Certainly, the Isra'iliyat took a special part in these legends on biblical figures (Wolfensohn 1933: 62).

Ka'b al-Ahbar is a convert who is often mentioned together with 'Abdallah b. Salam and who like him was a follower of 'Umar, of 'Uthman and Mu'awiya, and who has never travelled to Egypt. He functioned, like 'Abdallah as a councillor and a visionary, however, unlike 'Abdallah his Maqams in Egypt are acknowledged in the literature, for example in Lane's *Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians* (quote from Wolfensohn 1933: 32).

Wolfensohn explains the veneration of Ka'b in Egypt that his name is related to the Jusuf-Legends in the later collections and that these legends have their places in Egypt, therefore finding great interest among the people there (Wolfensohn, 1933: 33). He also points to Ali Bascha Mubarak (*al-Hitat al-Taufiqiyya*, II: 96) and his mentioning of a Cairean mosque where other saints are buried in the Sajida Zainab quarter, the Shari'a 'I-Nasiriyya street and also entering from the small Harat al-Sayis” (*ibid.*).

7. Between early Islamic politics and mission

As we have seen, despite all critique against the Isra'iliyat and the Qussas, 'Abdallah b. Salam remains a trustworthy pillar of the Orthodoxy and his traditions are officially presented at his Maqam, specifically in the one near Tell Thmuis in Kafr al-Amir. This fact needs further explanation. Possibly, we may ask, whether in all the textual arrangements there is potentially beyond the all magic, metaphors and legends, quite separately a dimension of the missionary, discursive and psychological power of these early Jewish converts in Islam and specifically of 'Abdallah b. Salam. The most critical authors against all early Islamic sources could give us here an interesting turn in understanding the specific climate of the struggle of ideas in the early time of Islamic conquest of Palestine and Syria. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook in “Hagarism” (1977) develop their

critique from the stand against Islam as the late-comer of the prophetic religions as “an unusual, and for a number of related reasons a peculiar historical event” (1977: VII). By way of abolishing the *maghazi*- and *hadith*-literature from the horizon of “real” sources, Crone und Cook are implementing a small number of non-Islamic sources to develop a diverse picture of the early history of Islamic expansion. This finds our interest, because they include some important points on the psychology of religious propaganda and the potential role of the Jewish converts in it. The point is that Jewish Messianism played a role in the expansion of Islam in the times of the Calif ‘Umar and that this idea contributed to the later reworking of the life history of Muhammad and his entourage in Medina. With this point Crone and Cook, however, remain mainly interested in the critique of the authenticity claims of the Islamic sources. They contribute little to further our understanding of the coincidence of Messianism, religious intellectualism and scholarship in early Islam. There is, as they claim, the “messianic aspect of the conquest of Palestine” and the respective “warmth of the Jewish reaction to the Arab conquest” (Crone/Cook 1977: 6). However, to merely discuss the metaphor of the Jewish idea of “‘Umar al-Faruq” representing the picture of “the one who will come,” in terms of a regressive imagery of reworking the sources in the 8th century, is a mere methodological question and out of tune with Islamic self-definition in early Islam.

The question for us is, whether the “Jews who mix with the Saracens” (Crone/Cook 1977: 6) played an important role in the dialogue between the conquering Arabs and the local populations and in which way this dialogue opened new fields of spiritual and ritual orientation. ‘Abdallah b. Salam is reported to have accompanied the Caliph ‘Umar at his raid to Jerusalem and that he later on was close to ‘Uthman and Mu‘awiya. The report that in 35 H. an Egyptian military unit came to Medina to support ‘Uthman – it came too late – gives some space for speculation with respect to a possible link to Egypt and its political and theological elite.

There are more speculations: Wolfensohn knows that Ka‘b al-Ahbar had already left Medina at the time of the murder of ‘Uthman and there were other influential persons who did not want to engage in the struggle over the Caliph-ship and left the town. Ibn ‘Abbas for example, who was in Mecca. ‘Amr b. al-‘As was in Palestine; only ‘Abdallah b. Salam seems to have stood on the side of the Caliph when the rebels came to murder him (Tab, Ann. I, 3017 cf. Wolfenson 1933: 31). Such reports show the local differences in influence of individual leaders and their different spheres of influence. It is interesting here to know, that the Medinese community of Jews had close “rapporti spirituali e forse anche commerciali con le comunità ebraiche della Palestina e della Babilonia” (Caetani 1905,I: 414).

Furthermore ‘Abdallah b. Salam seems to have explained individual names of biblical and qur`anic places in Jerusalem in terms of their significance for the new religion:

“In fact, eschatological descriptions assign a special role to the Temple Mount, the Valley of Hinnom and the Mount of Olives. According to ‘Abdallah ibn Salam, a Jew from Medina who embraced Islam after Mohammed’s arrival in that city, the *sirat* – the narrow bridge over the valley on Hinnom which all creatures must cross on Judgement Day – extends between the Mount of Olives and the Temple-area” (e.g. Muslim Iman III, 20/21; Hirschberg 1951/2: 342-3).

We could believe that such stories and reports belong to a type that was recently categorized as “*lenkendes historisches Erzählen*” (directing historical narrative) which is recently discovered among Arabists and Philologists as playing a major part in the cultural constructions of early Islam (e.g. van Ess 2001). Stefan Leder’s study on the narrative of Abu Sufyan’s questioning by Heraklios (2001: 1-42; 4) gives us an excellent account of the type of such narratives. However, all this is far beyond explaining why there exists a type of symbolic “networking” of ‘Abdallah b. Salam in the Eastern Nile-delta today and in the past. This is not to be explained with the few examples of “thematics” and traditions. However, the very local presence of today seems to have some significance with respect to monotheism and the past. It is this point that perhaps is another layer of his veneration, namely, that the typology of his functioning could also tell us something about his role in history.

8. The modern functioning of the Maqams

There is not one generally applied pattern of local saints in Egypt. Perhaps, however, one could attempt – for the sake of clarity and with a view on “history” and “continuity” – to construct a variety of ideal types based on clusters of different external and internal factors constituting the vitality of their contemporary veneration. Could one speak in this context of a certain ranking of the saints? And, certainly, if the construction of sainthood is about hierarchy and order, then, how do saints relate back to local social order?

To start with, the Maqams of the members of the Prophet’s family, the *ahl al-bayt*, all seem to be located in Cairo, the metropolis: Al-Husayn, Sayyida Zaynab, Sayyida Nafisa etc. However, the mere fact of their belonging to the *ahl al-bayt* would not automatically give them the very high rank in estimation and popularity. This is a similar pattern also to be observed with the Maqams of the Sahaba, the companions of the Prophet.

In the case of the great scholar and founder of one of the most important orthodox legal schools Imam al-Shafi’i (150-204 H./767-819 AD) who has his tomb in the City of the Death, the great southern cemetery, it is perhaps his role and influence in Egypt and the Islamic world as a scholar and not belonging to the Sa’ada or even to the Sahaba, that counts for his great popularity. However, it should also be noted that not every Tomb of a great scholar of early Islam is given a similar significance and veneration as a saint.

Of immediate interest in the view of the masses are the tombs of the Egyptian saints and spring offs of the Sufi movement: Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi (596-675 H./1200-1276 AD) in Tanta and Ibrahim al-Desuqi in Desuq (633-676 H./1236-1277 AD); (Goldziher 1969, II: 338 pp.; Mayeur-Jaouen 1994; Hallenberg 1997). They represent the Egyptian half in the “clan” of the four great figures – the four poles – of Sufism besides the Iraqian al-Jilani (470-561 H./1077-1165 AD) and al-Rifa’i (512-578 H./1118-1182 AD). However, rural Egypt has its own landscape of saints of all strands: martyrs of the Futuh, the time of Islamic conquest of Egypt, others belonging to the Sa’ada, martyrs in the struggle against the crusaders, local Sufi shaykhs, however often only small men, ‘symbols’ of the *rajul salih*, the ‘true’ man, who with some very general name only signify their historical anonymity, a category which was already referred to by Goldziher (1969, II: 384).

This variety of types of saints clearly shows that there is no short cut pattern in the veneration of local saints, and that even over periods of time tombs and places changed their local or even regional importance by changing the name of the saint. It is also clear that the intensity of veneration and the popularity of a saint does not depend exclusively on religious factors. There is a certain affinity of saints with Pharaonic places, however this affinity is not exclusive and in the last instance not decisive. We also should keep in mind that this affinity does not relate to the Sabakheen and the search for treasures and gold in the mounds and Pharaonic Tells, as some crude reading of some archaeological reports would suggest. “Low” saints in the religious hagiography can have nevertheless a high esteem and popularity (and later attract a certain “high” religious interest), however, the contrary is perhaps more decisive. It is therefore most important to state, that the question, why a certain tomb is at a certain place, why this tomb is then turned into a Maqam, then a mosque added, and finally perhaps turned into religious centre of regional importance, is in most cases very difficult to answer. The question of the functioning of gaining a definite place in the Pantheon of Egyptian saints is therefore oblivious. This question towards the authenticity of a saint or his pseudo-character as a historical figure belonging to “his” historical place, remains buried in the process of local practice and arrangements and the related potentials and powers of emerging scenarios of an emerging convergence of local interests related to the creative material and symbolic worlds of “memory” in religion, family, village and the state. The creativity there often depends on the potentials of “bricolage” immanent in these factors at the moment of their appearance and potential coincidence. Definitely, as the “archaeological” dimension clearly shows “bricolage” needs an interplay of both the internal perspective of local players and the external perspective of observing outsiders.

With respect to the social function of the Maqams, Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen (2004) points to three factors at work which all include the secular dimension in the construction of the saint. First, she draws on the importance of the institution of the *rizaq ihbasiyya* (a rural type of *waqf*), the religious donation, functioning

to administer and maintain the Maqam, with small-scale family networks from Maqam to Maqam from village to village. Thus, the extreme orientation to the saint is part of a process of embedding the communities into a landscape structured by trade and pilgrimage over centuries. Second and often related to the first factor, there is the flourishing of local Sufi-Tariqas. This is a factor for maintaining the patterns of the saint's succession and with it of village identity. We may add the building of a *Zawiya* near the Maqam, serving as a place for Sufi meditation and practice, which also contributes to the ritual importance of a place attracting the *ziyarat*, *mawalid*, and *nudhur* etc. Third the mythological function of a saint, relating him to the state and to official religious schools which support the financial and structural setting of a Maqam and its strategic function within the collective memory in the local and national context.

Perhaps there are some further important factors in operation. The state and the official religious institutions, namely local or national schools of the al-Azhar, are – if not immediately present – always a sort of an absent centre in all matters of public religious events. In the local vernacular for example the *mulid* (mawlid), the feast of the *shaykh* is a standard expression for chaos and confusion. Samuli Schielke (2004: 180, fn. 6) most interestingly observed how this is expressed with the metaphor “*mulid wi-sahbu ghayib*” (a mawlid without its master, i.e. the saint). I think it is important to note the ambiguity of this metaphor with respect to “disorder,” it is the absence of the shaykh/saint, not the absence of *hukuma* (government) which creates disorder, despite however, that the Maqams, once they are actively venerated, are registered, and thus administered and controlled. Maqams are often the very place of interaction between government and local interests. As with respect to ‘Abdallah’s shrine near Tell Thmuis, the “text” representation of the saint is part of this interplay, not to speak of architecture, location and the organisation of attention of the Maqam. In this interplay there is a steadily changing pattern of codification and recognition of the “sacredness” of the saint and his place. Certainly, what Schielke has observed, shows a changing pattern of obsession about formal ritual and control of public space which relates to the arrangements of the *mawalid* (pl.) of the major saints.

There is one further significant element in the construction and maintenance of saints and their Maqams which lies in the nature of what Egyptian writers like Ali Fahmy call “*din sha’abi*” which incorporates more than popular beliefs but rather a whole system of knowledge and mentalities linking the metaphysical problem of deepest everydayness to the place and the shrine. In addition this includes, of course, the flourishing of local markets and the growth of the attendance of the saint, linking his success ambitiously to his transcendental powers. Thus, “*din sha’abi*” is much responsible for the flourishing of such saints in the Delta like al-Badawi (Tanta), al-Disuqi (Disuq) and Sidi Shibl (Shuhada), and the respective steady growth of the towns and markets which they maintain. It is within these fields that we have to re-consider the role of the saint in constructing and spiritually incorporating certain historical locations and spatial arrangements

with respect to specific historical events. Furthermore, there relates a certain metaphorical empowerment of speech and action to the saint as representing a sort of eternal continuity of early Islamic history in style. Examples of this are well found in scriptural expressions of early Islam (cf. Leder 2001; van Ess 2001) and with no less importance in medieval Islam with a much stronger presence of expressions of the Pharaonic period (Sezgin 1994, 2001, 2002/3; Haarmann 1990, 1995).

As with respect to *din sha'abi* today these constructions follow a similar dialogical principle, namely, the popular narrative of the saint re-instituting his miracles by way of linking his own fate to everyday feelings and judgements of the people. Thus the popular narrative of the saint embodies an understanding of everydayness linked to the transcendental world which includes an immense pool of transmitted oral and written stories and legends of the saint. The vitality of local spirit among the impoverished peasant population and their psychology of immediacy of world encounter and fantasy develops a pattern of cultural memory beyond modern ethics of authenticity in “text,” “descent” and “locality.” The empowering of the saint in the immediacy of “his” event can be directly linked to the empowering of the local “Islamic” way of life of the attending masses.

There is no doubt about this immanent secular power of the saint and his metaphysical rank. This is his direct linkage to the understanding of chaos or order. Furthermore, there is a clear cut economic sense related to his cult and the place of his veneration. This is not only a matter of the closeness of the bazaar as in the case of great saints like Sayyidna Husayn or Sayyida Zaynab in metropolitan Cairo, it emerges deeply on the barns around the Maqams in any little village.

9. The historical psychology of the place

Islamologists – as mentioned above – consider the veneration of saints as contradicting dogma and scriptural tradition. As much there is ‘dogma’ of the light of divine revelation as in the “Light Verse” (XXIV, 35) related to this-worldly spirituality, however, there is also no doubt about the pure secular nature of the Prophet himself as a human actor. Ignaz Goldziher made it quite clear that puritan Sunnis and ‘enlightened’ sceptics opposed strongly the idea of sainthood in Islam. He insists on the “influence of inherited instincts of the believers” (1969, II: 277) and on a variety of “psychological factors” (ibid.: 286) as being responsible for the cultic continuity from pre-Islamic periods. He quotes a formula of Ernest Renan, that humanity always from its beginning preached at the same place (ibid., II: 334/303), as a good example explaining this local continuities of the sacred. Certainly, as we have mentioned above, the Eastern Delta of the Nile being as John Holloday noticed “an important culture contact zone between Asia and Egypt” (Holloday 1982: 9), is overloaded with such “transhistorical” places of prayer. Would this aspect of transhistoricality contribute to explain the very

specific presence of 'Abdallah b. Salam in this region? Goldziher also already explained to us the unworried practice of the popular tradition to place the tomb of one and the same person at different places. (Goldziher 1987: 336-40). So, certainly, that we have a multiplicity of Maqams may not be irritating. However, certainly it remains of significance that we have so many Maqams of 'Abdallah b. Salam in one region, and that there is no evidence of other places and shrines of his in Egypt, nor in the rest of the Muslim world.

The ambiguity of the place is further revealed in looking at the historical significance of three different locations of the tombs of 'Abdallah b. Salam. The Egyptian cultural geographers of the 19th century already pointed to the astonishing vicinity of Islamic saints and Pharaonic places. Ali Mubarak Pasha for example in his *al-Khittat al-tawfiqiyya al-jadida* mentions – as Goldziher made it a point – mentions the fact of a tomb of Osiris which was turned into a *zawiya al-maslub* (Goldziher 1968, II: 384). At the Tell of Thmuis, south of Mansura, we are told by archaeologists, that there have been relicts from the 4th century B.C. and from the late 9th century AD relicts of Islamic ceramics (EAAE 1999: 663). This could be taken as indicating the highs of the cultural activity at the place in the time of nearly one and a half Millenium before and after Christ. Amélineau (1893: 500 pp.) seems to have found this as a Coptic place in Daqahliyya, however with obviously diminishing importance over time, it has been ultimately destroyed in the times of the Turkish conquest. De Meulenaere (1976) collects reports which date back to the 18th century AD of western travellers and archaeologists in Mendes and Thmuis. The Qubba of 'Abdallah b. Salam was always there, a place of shelter and peace – and sometimes for the storage of relicts found on the tell. The official Egyptian geography of 1945 categorizes Kafr al-Amir 'Abdallah as one of the *bilad al-qadima* – old villages – of the district of Sinbilawin. It is stated that its original name was Bani 'Abdallah in the Ottoman Period and that in 1228 H. it was first named as Kafr al-Amir 'Abdallah (Ramzi 1945, II/1: 194). If this is reality, then the story of 1869 by Daninos Pasha on his visit at “tell Tmay (village d'Abdallah-ben Salam)” mentioning a certain Salem as a local leader and as his helper and guide could well fit (de Meulenaere 1976: 92). What, however, has this Salem to do with 'Abdallah b. Salam. Could it be that a local clan of Salams, representatives of which until today lead as Khalifs in the Zaffa (the Friday procession) of the Mawlid at the Maqam of 'Abdallahb. Salam today? Are all this fictive allusions? Maybe!

On the other hand we are told that among the people of the village, '*anda al-amma*, the place is named Kafr Ibn Salam and that this is meant to be al-'Amir, namely 'Abdallah b. Salam, the *ashab al-nabi*, companion of the Prophet. The Maqam is his and they do the pilgrimage for him in great belief (*yazurunahu da'iman*). However, the story ends with a laconic: Only God knows the truth (*wa allahu 'alam bil-haqiqa*) (Ramzi 1945, II/1: 194-5). The Tell is mentioned here in relation to Tumai al-'Imdid the village south east and as part of the twin town Mendes (ibid. 187-9; see also al-Rub': 197). And certainly asserting Goldziher,

the “psychology of the people” could have easily mixed up both, speaking for each place as the “*Tell bint al-yahudi*,” and in their believe a town of a Jewish Queen which was justly destroyed. Does this have something to do with the Jewish convert to Islam as a religious witness and protector abolishing the *shubaha*t of the people on the Tell? Is this something new in the age of fundamentalism or rather a sort of repetition of collective memory of the strength of Islam in earlier periods?

A second place, in the small village Barq al-‘Izz very near to Mansura, the situation is completely different. The village has a short mentioning in the “*Qamus al-jugrafiya*” of Ramzi. The village was originally called “Barbansaq” or (coptic) “Birqinqis” (see also Halm 1982: 710) oder “Bir Bansaq” oder “Bir Bansafa.” Its popular name was “Birqinqis,” 1228 H. it was officially registered as Barq Naqs. By the initiative of a local Shaykh it was renamed in 1930 “Barq al-‘Izz” (Lightning of Glory; Ramzi 1994, II, 1: 218). This is the short mentioning of the place – no knowledge of the Maqam of our ‘Abdallah, nothing about the reasons behind changing the name. Similarly, at a third place situated in the Lake Manzala near Matariyya, although the Maqam of ‘Abdallah stands on a Tell, there is no real history of the place. Ramzi again is primarily concerned with the name of places and their historically official registration (although he sometimes goes back to the Geography of Antiquity), here we only read of two places put together as Matariyya in 1903. The Maqam of ‘Abdallah is not mentioned, not the Tell of the Gezira (ibid.: 209). Whether there is something like the “islamized” Coptic saint like the one on the Island of “Tuna” (vgl. Mayeur-Jaouen 1994: 98, fn 70; 258, 262) is not known among the local fishermen. The English traveller Hamilton has at the beginning of the 19th century found a Tell by this name. However, not seen any Maqam. Later on Burton does not find the Tell near Matariyya, however the fishermen bring him there and remember the place in high esteem (de Meulenaere 1976: 51, 74).

10. Some conclusive remarks

The local arrangements of the places of the Islamic saint ‘Abdallah b. Salam – and his Maqams in the region of Mansura in one way or another show signs of ongoing and obviously very intensive antagonisms – seem to bear the signs of an inner Islamic struggle over orthodox, and then Salafite or heterodox and popular Sufi orientations with respect to an ‘inner religious good,’ namely, the diverse forms of treatment of the continuity of pre-Islamic and Pharaonic culture in Islamic terms. The momentums and ritual potentials of the old world have been absorbed and reworked and re-activated. It is always the shrine, the Maqam, which is the place of reworking. The places symbolically express this struggle over continuity and monotheistic purity and break with history. The potential regression into pagan practices and Polytheism is counteracted first by the construction of

the Maqam, the place of the saint and its public recognition. This is at the same time a place of memory of the past, where symbolic, ritual and scriptural performances of past and the saint entail divergent arrangements with respect to functional interests, communal traditions or for religious purity. The shrines are places for observing of the past. However, specifically in the last 30 years with the emergence of Salafite purism on the local scene, the places turn into arenas of a steady fight over ritual and Islamic form of veneration. This discourse of Islamic purity and popular memory, originated in the far a way metropolises, however, they are now fought sometimes at the most remote and marginal places, turning the local shrine into a place of cultural reconstruction under conditions of strong marginality. The modern re-arrangement of the shrines of 'Abdallah b. Salam took place in this time. However, the current re-arrangements are only re-phrasing discourses and symbolic expressions which were already active in former times.

The great Mulid as it is performed in the village near Tell Thmuis is powerful and the strong tradition here helped the modern reconstruction of the shrine. In the collection of texts locally assembled texts, the saint is presented as the scholar of Early Islam par excellence. However, in the sacred procession (*zaffa*) he figures as an incarnative part of a spiritual feast longing close to the presence of God (resembling the Kyrios of the old times). Furthermore, there remains, the magic figure, the mythical sailor in heaven and between the worlds, symbolizing the presence of an “alien,” an “absent” people, in his tales, which are part pf popular literature. All this is ambiguous, tenuous and culturally productive. Despite these contradictions, there is continuity in the overpowering imagination and symbolic representation of the “physical” presence which is expressed in the metaphorical details of the presented “reality” of the sacred. This multi-polar form of the presence of the sacred subject then is the real focus of the perspectivism which is necessary for understanding the sacred as a momentum and a condition of the local world and its immediate recognition.

Methodologically, therefore the different directions of this presence are to be made subject of multiple layers of observation: Text, time, locus, symbol and form. Only in this multiplicity we may be able to understand the actuality of the phenomenon of the “sacred” as it has become part of the modern world.

Constructions of sainthood and the specific meaning of it acquires at one specific place and in one specific region the dialog and co-operation of Egyptologists, specialists in Islamic Studies and Ethnologists, as Haarmann (1990: 57) has already suggested for at least the first two of the named disciplines. It would, however, be too short cut to interpret the need for such a dialog purely in terms of the more recent attempts of Egyptians to cope with both, their “Islamic” and their “Pharaonic identity” as a national task. It is also the ambiguous “religious” continuity of the place which contributes to give the religious Islamic reconstruction a turn in which the Maqam distinguishes itself against a seemingly secular

world of the past: a distinction which in many ways rephrases the historical struggles related to the emergence of monotheism and modern religion.

I am proposing with this paper a sociological perspective which, focusing on processes of reconstruction of the Sacred, combines the different disciplinary fields of tackling the relationship between the Saint and his place. The various disciplinary perceptions of the Sacred today cannot be administered separately, rather we have to include them as part and parcel of the modern event of the Sacred at its place. The place itself evolves as a discursive field in which essential elements of it turn out to be made present and exchanged. The place combines the history of “origin” with its own significance as well as with the various historical layers of conditions, actions and intensions and of its symbolic design. The Maqam thus reassures fictional realities of the saint: his live story, the authored texts of the saint, the hagiographic texts, the forms of their authentication. As already mentioned by Goldziher, the multiplicity of places and appearances of one and the same saint is a common feature of Islamic saints. In deed, I am proposing a multiple lecture of all this which relates to diverse layers of inner experience of the saint through the eyes of modern venerators as much as to the history of the factual verification of his existence. There is something factual in attempting to make “present” someone who is “absent”: the relationship between time and symbol, ideas and events, forms of embodiment, metaphor, image and magic.

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Chapter 7

Story, Wisdom and Spirituality: Yemen as the Hub between the Persian, Arabic and Biblical Traditions

RAIF GEORGES KHOURY

The Yemen, *al-Yaman* in Arabic, is associated with many images and evocations which inspire dreams: *Arabia felix*, which incorporates the meaning of the country's name in Arabic; this is clearly expressed by the verb *yamana*, *yamina* and *yamuna* (to be happy etc.) in its triple form. *Yaman*, *yamna* and *yamīn* also refer to the right side or right hand which has a preferential position in the ancient and particularly biblical cultures, to which the Arab-Islamic culture belongs as their continuation; one only needs to think of the Last Judgement, *Yaum al-ba'th* ("day of waking from the graves") which consolidates this image. Yāqūt, the author of the classical encyclopaedia of the Muslim world *Mu'djam al-buldān*, explores such interpretations before dealing with the geographical and other information about the country.¹ Much has, moreover, been published about this country, in particular in relation to the division of the country in the early 1960s and after its reunification in the early 1990s. A series of studies by Joseph Chelhod, published in Paris around 20 years ago, on this subject are particularly worthy of mention.²

The fact that the Yemen has been repeatedly subject to neglect is a question related to the development of Islamic history and culture, whose heyday is associated with the Umayyad and, in particular, the Abbasid dynasties. Many studies have now been published which demonstrate the importance of the first Islamic generation of the 1st/7th and 2nd/8th centuries of Islam/AD within this process. The question arises here as to where the drive – both military and spiritual – for the gradual conquest of the country originated. I stress the significance of this country – otherwise virtually neglected in the specialist literature – which consisted of diverse regions in early Islam with a merging of influences originating from all of the important orientations of that period. I would not like people to come to the conclusion that the Yemen was important in early Islam because I have com-

1 Yāqūt, *Mu'djam al-buldān*, V, 447 ff.

2 Chelhod, Joseph et al. (1984-1985), 3 Vols: L'Arabie du Sud, histoire et civilisation. 1: Le peuple yéménite et ses racines. 2: La société yéménite de l'Hégire aux idéologies modernes. 3: Cultures et institutions du Yémen.

piled monographs on scholars such as Wahb Ibn Munabbih,³ ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Lahī’a⁴ and others; on no account would this be correct! The Yemen increasingly appears to me as a country, in which the roots of many early Islamic movements lie which, however, were gradually replaced by other undoubtedly more solid movements. Nonetheless, the personalities and lasting influences, without which it is impossible to explain subsequent developments, should not simply be set aside.⁵

In the first volume of his study, Chelhod stresses the inadequacy of the information that is generally conveyed, for example, on the actual contributions of the Yemenis to Islamic military expansion. He makes the following comments in this regard:

“Les chroniqueurs et les historiens arabes reconnaissent généralement que les Yéménites avaient contribué efficacement au succès des armées arabes. Nous estimons, quant à nous, qu’ils sont bien en deçà de la vérité et que la part des Yéménites dans la conquête arabe fut prépondérante. Il ne serait pas exagéré de dire que sans leur concours, l’Empire arabe n’aurait pas du tout été aussi loin, ni édifié aussi rapidement.”⁶

(“The Arab chroniclers and historians generally acknowledge that the Yemenis made an effective contribution to the success of the Arab armies. We ourselves estimate that they are here on the side of truth and that the Yemenis played a predominant role in the Arab conquest. It would not be exaggerating to say that without their support, the Arab Empire would not at all have got so far or been established so quickly.”)

I would like to examine more here than these ideas of an acknowledged expert on southern Arabia. I would like to stress the significance of this area in connection with the role of story, wisdom and spirituality in Islamic culture and present further important arguments as proof of this.⁷ Unfortunately, the article about Yemen in the Encyclopaedia of Islam does not fulfil the task of providing a comprehensive account of the country,⁸ as newly acquired insights are inadequately represented or not included at all. However, these are dependent on the analysis of the oldest sources on the Yemen which were introduced into circulation di-

3 See Khoury, R.G. (1972) “Wahb B. Munabbih.”

4 See Khoury, R.G. (1986) “Abd Allāh Ibn Lahī’a. Juge et grand maître de l’Ecole Egyptienne.”

5 On the question of the enchantment and disenchantment of the world, see Gauchet, Marcel (1985) “Le désenchantement du monde.”

6 Chelhod, Joseph (1984), *L’Arabie du Sud, histoire et civilisation*, Vol. 1: *Le peuple yéménite et ses racines*, p. 41; see also the paragraph titled “Le Yémen et la conquête arabe.”

7 Many of my contributions have substantiated this belief for many years and are referred to or quoted in detail in this paper.

8 On this, see *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (1960), in the following written as EI², XI, pp. 269-280 (A. Grohmann/W.C. Brice et al.).

rectly or indirectly by Yemeni authors, starting, of course, with Wahb Ibn Munabbih who undoubtedly represents a key figure in this context.

I. The history of pre-Islam and early Islam

The meaning of *Arabia felix* emerges reveals itself most clearly here, as the books on these early Arab centuries were written by Yemenis and in association with the Yemen. Like every historical beginning in the past, this history, if one can call it that, was a vision of the world, which incorporated simultaneously history and fiction as emerges clearly in the anthology “Story-telling in the framework of non-fictional Arabic literature,” edited by S. Leder.⁹ In my contribution to this anthology, I highlighted both of these sides, *inter alia* by highlighting the problem of orality.¹⁰ Everything was initially passed on orally before later being recorded in writing, *ne varietur*, as noted by R. Blachère.¹¹ Thus, everything bears the hallmark of orality whose ideal form of transmission was story-telling. Story-telling was a common genre in the old oriental cultures and displays similar traits there to those it displays in Islam. In Islam it is associated with the oldest books about Arabia which bear witness to early events in the lives of the tribes who lived there. It is known that from the second half of the 2nd/8th century the Islamic period was the first to begin to summarize, expand and systematically record these accounts in writing with new material from the newly-emerged Islamic Empire. Poetry was the dominant form here and accompanied the entire culture with its omnipotent presence. Everything in cultural development was influenced by it, and above all history.

Some key terms are of extreme significance here, particularly as the entire Islamic culture, its great development and precipitous rise, is a culture of words.¹² By way of introduction to the topic, let us now look at some of the terms which have been in use since the beginning of the Arab-Islamic culture and which lead us to the core of the subject under discussion here:

1. *Adab* is the oldest substantiated expression which was common from at least the 2nd/8th century and on which it would be possible to hold long lectures without ever exhausting the rich history of its development.¹³ The experts associate this term with education and educational literature because it is intended to be

9 See Leder, Stefan, ed. (1998) “Story-telling in the framework of non-fictional Arabic literature.”

10 Khoury, R.G. (1998) “Geschichte oder Fiktion. Zur erzählerischen Gattung der ältesten Bücher über Arabien,” in: Leder (1998), pp. 370-387.

11 Blachère, Régis (1952) “Histoire de la littérature arabe,” I: 86 pp., 117 pp.

12 These include terms such as: *Adab*, *Tahdhīb*, *Tathqīf*, *Thaqāfa* etc., which are briefly presented above.

13 See EI², I, pp. 175.

used in the creation of literature that is defined in this way, thus primarily spirit and character, so that this genre best represents the entire Arabian culture. A very distinguished literature emerged around this word which originally also had a special meaning (see below), but was increasingly transferred to what is known as educational literature, which spread as early as the 8th century and was represented by Arabized Persian authors. The most famous of these was 'Abd Allāh Ibn al-Muqaffa' (720-756 AD),¹⁴ the author of the oldest collection of animal fables in Islam, *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. He wrote many books which featured the word *Adab* in their titles: *Al-Adab al-kabīr* ("The Big *Adab* Work"), *al-Adab as-saghīr* ("The Small *Adab* Work"). It was the same Ibn al Muqaffa' who addressed a treatise to the caliph of his time in a concealed form, in which presented to the Islamic leader and his followers the norms of truly educated rule and the good behaviour towards the subjects; the treatise was entitled *Risālat fī l-sahāba*¹⁵ ("Treatise on the Companions of the Caliph"). As we can see, this important concept found its point of entry into Arabian-Islamic society through the mediation of the non-Arabs who came to Arabia and whose role in the area of the education of the Islamic authorities was truly considerable. The initiated path was significantly extended and systematically classified in the 3rd/9th century.

Tāhā Husayn (1889-1973), the Egyptian scholar and most renowned critic of modern Arabic literature referred to the history of the development of this concept for the first time in the modern era in one of his first books, *Fī l-adab al-djāhili* (On Pre-Islamic Literature),¹⁶ before analysing the purely philological categories of thought.¹⁷ He repeatedly examines the history of this term in a way that is not possible to demonstrate here.

After Ibn al-Muqaffa', the concept of *adab* became a key one, in particular in the general education of Islamic scholars as demonstrated in detail by the authors of the 3rd/9th century, such as al-Djāhiā (777-869) and Ibn Qutayba (828-889), who also professed their commitment to a humanist education which became a matter of course in the Islamic Middle Ages. Thus, as he too adopted this credo, the aforementioned T. Husayn could state that: *Al-adabu huwa l-akhḍhu min kulli shay'in bi-tarafīn*¹⁸ ("Literature consists in taking something from every corner [of a discipline]"). *Felix Arabia!* Nowadays, the term is used to define the literature but retains however its meaning of 'education,' 'good manners' etc. in the everyday life of the Arabs.

2. A second concept soon emerged: to the present day, *Thaqāfa* is the techni-

14 See EI², III, p. 883 ff.

15 Kurd 'Alī, M. (ed. 1913, 3. 1946 edition); also in the author's collected works, Abū l-Nasr, 'Umar (published in 1966); French translation with commentary and detailed glossary by Charles Pellat (1976).

16 Husayn, Tāhā (1968) *Fī l-adab al-djāhili* Kairo.

17 Loc. cit., p. 37 ff.

18 Loc. cit., p. 19, 16.

cal term for culture in the Arabian world. However, this word also developed from a purely material meaning, i.e. from the verb *thaqafa/thaqqafa*, to smooth or polish stones etc. Reference can be made here again to the ancient Arabian and early Islamic worlds, in which proper names with professional connotations or similar were derived from this verbal stem, as demonstrated in many instances by names of individuals from the early Islamic period.

3. A third concept with the same original meaning as *Thaqāfa* is *Tahdhīb* from *hadhdhaba*, i.e. smooth, polish etc. (initially stones and material substances like the previous verb); it was soon used as a basis for major works on the refinement of character, i.e. about education. The most famous of these is the work of the philosopher and historian Miskawayh (932-1030 AD): *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* (i.e. “Education or the Education of Characters”).¹⁹

4. Another term is *Hadāra*, used by the greatest historian of Islam, Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406)²⁰ in the sense of civilization, i.e. *hadara*, to be present or settled, hence in the meaning of an urban way of life and all that is associated with it in contrast to Bedouinism. Also *Madaniyya* or *Tamaddun* are used in the same sense and express precisely the same view of urban life and lifestyle, but are derived from the term *Madīna* or town which is of Aramaic origin. Both terms refer in different ways to the way of life that emerges in the town, the exposure to urban concentration; however, whereas the former refers to the concentration itself, i.e. the agglomeration, the second refers to the commitment to a ruler (also religious leader as *Diyāna*, i.e. religious devotion, means religion itself, as is the case for the other word *Dīn* for this last term).

Nowadays, *Hadāra* and *Thaqāfa* are almost identical, the first refers more frequently to historical-cultural representation in association with the past, whereas the second, *Thaqāfa*, best corresponds to our contemporary requirements. Given that I repeatedly refer here to earlier periods in Islamic culture, I will keep this last term in mind, but also intend the visions these earlier periods had in association with the term culture, even if these terms appear to differ to us today. In particular as the term culture, which is derived from the Latin *colere/cultum* in the sense of to build on, reside in, maintain, actually leads more in the direction of the aforementioned historian, Ibn Khaldūn, who refers to *‘umrān*, i.e. of residing, building on and hence of civilization in urban life. We can see that behind all of these common terms with their various nuances, one common

19 Arkoun, Mohamed (1982) “L’Humanisme arabe au IXe/Xe siècle. Miskawayh, philosophe et historien.” The full title of the work analyzed by Arkoun is: *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq wa-tathīr al-a’rāq*, see pp. 115, in which the first part refers to the “die Kunstfertigkeit der Bildung der Charaktere” (*sinā at tahdīb al-akhlāq*), an expression from the ethical literature, according to Arkoun, which was very common. Yahyā Ibn ‘Adī is supposed to have already used this title, see *Rasā’il al-bulaghā’*, ed. Kurd ‘Alī; Arkoun, 115, note 3.

20 See EI², III, p. 825 ff.

link is important: i.e. the concept of building, processing, cultivating. The path from here to the dominating social and political systems is an easy one.

This was vocabulary which provided a basis for the development of the classical literature of Islam, however in the case of the story-telling tradition, an older vocabulary existed which was associated with story-telling, reporting etc., e.g. *Khabar* (pl. *Akhbār*) (report), *Qissa* (pl. *Qisas*), *Hadīth* (history, story) – and derived from these: the participle form *Qāss* (pl. *Qussās*) (storyteller) and *Muhaddith* (narrator, traditionary, story-teller). The first two of these terms are found in the oldest books about Yemen in pre-Islamic times and assume a special place in this context, as nothing original has come down to us from the old Arabian literature apart from the poetry and a few fragments, which in their original form cannot be of prime significance for the entire literary production of the generation of early Islamic scholars. The works in question are:

1. *Kitāb al-Tīdjān* by Ibn Hishām, author of the official *Sīra* of the Prophet Muhammad²¹

2. *Akhbār 'Abīd* (or) *'Ubayd Ibn Sharya al-Djurmī al-Yamanī*.²²

The book by Ibn Hishām would be unimaginable without the main source, which was provided to him by a small document on the same topic by Wahb Ibn Munabbih: *Kitāb al-Mulūk al-mutawwadja min Himyar wa-akhbārihim wa-qisasihim wa-qubūrihim wa-ash'ārihim* (“Book of the Crowned Kings of Himyar, their Histories and Stories and their Tombs and Poems”).²³ In the transmission of Asad Ibn Mūsā (132-212/750-827) this book was adopted and expanded from the aforementioned version after a grandson of Ibn Munabbih.²⁴

The work of Ibn Sharya is particularly interesting and enables many observations concerning not only the book itself, but also the person of the narrator and the monarch who features in it, i.e. Mu'āwiya, the founder of the Umayyad Dynasty. The fact that the title betrays certain external similarities with the work by Ibn Munabbih, which was based on Ibn Hishām's “*Kitāb al-Tīdjān*” should not

21 The oldest surviving parts of the *Sīra* or *Maghāzī* (both names were interchangeable) go back to Ibn Munabbih and are found on a few papyrus sheets as is the case with most documents from the first century of Islam/7th century AD; on this, see Khoury, R.G. (1972) “Wahb B. Munabbih,” Arabic text. Based on this old version on papyrus, it would appear that the later versions increased significantly in terms of scope; the first of these which had an official character is that of Ibn Hishām (8th to early 9th century), the main parts of which were recently translated into French by Wahib Atallah: “Ibn Hichām. La biographie du prophète Mahomet. Texte traduit et annoté par Wahib Atallah.” Paris, Fayard 2004.

22 *Kitāb al-Tīdjān fī mulūk himyar* and *Akhbār 'Ubayd* (or *'Abīd*) *Ibn Sharya al-Djurmī fī akhbār al-Yaman wa-ash'ārihā wa-ansābihā* first appeared together in Haidarabad in 1347/1928; new edition, San'ā 1978, with a foreword and notes by 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Maqālih, professor at the University of Haidarabad also author, poet (and politician for some years now).

23 See Khoury, R.G. (1972) “Wahb B. Munabbih,” p. 286 ff.

24 On Asad, see Khoury, R.G. (1976) “Asad B. Mūsā,” *Kitāb az-Zuhd*.

be dismissed out of hand; however there are some fundamental differences which concern, in particular, the content and structure of the work. Ibn Hishām's text is longer and more biblical in its roots; in other words, unlike 'Ubayd Ibn Sharya, as the author of Biblical history in Islam, Wahb Ibn Munabbih, the author of the core material, is concerned with highlighting the close relations between Yemen and the Biblical world so as to present them to the northern Arabians. Firstly, Wahb's pride in his homeland and the Himyarites expressed in a different way than in the work of his compatriot Ibn Sharya. Thus, the motive for the writing of his work appears to lie less in the quest for the wonderful, which may nonetheless have had a role to play in the endeavour, than in the pride of the Himyarites of whom he was one through his mother, and also on behalf of the pious Muslim to portray the people mentioned in the Qur'an and above all to associate them with the history of the Biblical prophets and to refer to their particular place in the proximity of Allah. The Himyarites are compared with *al-sirādj al-mudī` fī l-laylati l-zalmā`* ("shining lamp in the dark nights"); God defends them against and elevates them above man.²⁵

Overall, the Qur'an plays a key role for Wahb because it represented an ultimate objective with a unique value. Although both wanted to be a *Muhaddīth*, of the two, in his reports and commentaries in the sense of the traditional Islamic *Hadīth*, Ibn Sharya was less religious in nature; thus, F. Krenkow was unable to find his name among the *Hadīth* transmitters.²⁶ In terms of the knowledge required of him at Mu'āwiya's court, 'Ubayd did not need any profound knowledge of the Islamic tradition and the Qur'an quotes peppered throughout his *Akhbār* had more to do with added zest than real substance. This explains the enormous difference between the beginnings of the two texts: Wahb's text starts with holy writs which are associated with individual Biblical personalities, from Adam to the Prophet of Islam. As opposed to this, Ibn Sharya's *Akhbār* are introduced with the history of the summoning of the story-teller by the caliph on the suggestion of 'Amr Ibn al-'As (died 43/663, or 42/662),²⁷ with a unique description of the powers of the ruler, his habits and the nocturnal stories taking place, about which more will be said below. Of course, both authors remain very Yemeni in their love of their homeland and the pride they take in it, but in completely different ways. These differences are historically and culturally informative; the start of Ibn Sharya's text provides astonishing information about the education and erudition of these early times, thus I will now discuss it briefly.

After the introductory *Basmala* and *Hamdala*, the narrator, who is called al-Barqī, takes over the *Hadīth*, which he quotes based on 'Ubayd Ibn Sharya. We

25 Ibn Hishām (1978) "*Kitāb al-Tidjān*," p. 64.

26 Krenkow, F. (1928) "The Two Oldest Books on Arabic Folklore." In: *Islamic Culture* 2, p. 55 ff., 204 ff.

27 On this, see Khoury, R.G. (1986) "'Abd Allāh Ibn Lahī'a," p. 91-93.

shall see that the word *Hadīth* has no religious meaning here in the sense of the Islamic tradition, but that of the traditional, old-Arabian and early Islamic (and later) narration, the *Qissa*, which emerged later, in particular in association with the Biblical story or *Qisas al-anbiyā`*. It is evidenced for the first time in the title of the book *Kitāb Bad` al-khalq wa-qisas al-anbiyā`* by `Umāra Ibn Wathīma Ibn Mūsā Ibn al-Furāt al-Fārisī (died 289/902) which this son transmitted after his father Wathīma (died 237/851).²⁸ The use of the word *Hadīth* in `Ubayd's book should be noted here. It could be assumed that this is a normal experience of *Hadīth* transmission; it undoubtedly involves *Akhbār*, i.e. reports, which are not religious in nature, but more secular, pagan and simply old-Arabian, thus the word *Hadīth* should be understood here in the sense of *Qissa*. Another, older – actually the oldest known example – of the same word in the sense of *Qissa* is the heading of the story of David, the oldest known one in Islam which is found in the Heidelberg papyrus of Wahb Ibn Munabbih and literally states: *Bismi (A) llāhi l-Rahmāni l-Rahīmi. Hadīthu Dāwūda* (“In the name of the Compassionate and Good God. The Story of David”).²⁹

I believe that I have demonstrated clearly enough that this version of the papyrus is based on a much older original papyrus, which definitely originated in the 2nd/8th century (the second half of this century at the latest) in association with the version of the above-mentioned father Wathīma al-Fārisī.³⁰ Concretely, this means that the two texts were recorded in written form in an epoch when the word *Hadīth* was used to refer to all kinds of narratives and also in the sense of the secular *Khābar*, i.e. report, or profane *Qissa*, i.e. story. This is no longer the case with the oldest collection of Biblical stories by Wathīma and his `Umāra after him: the reason for this is simple, as with the second half of the 2nd/8th century material that was previously handed down orally was increasingly recorded in written form as highlighted by al-Dhahabī³¹ and some Islamic historians after

- 28 S. Khoury, R.G. (1978) “Les légendes prophétiques dans l’Islam depuis le I^{er} jusqu’au III^e siècle de l’Hégire...”
- 29 Khoury, R.G. (1972) “Wahb B. Munabbih, Geschichte Davids,” p. 34, line 2.
- 30 Khoury, R.G. (1978) “Les légendes prophétiques dans l’Islam,” p. 158 ff., in particular p. 163-165; *ibid.* (1986) “‘Abd Allāh Ibn Lahī’a (97-174/715-790). Juge et grand maître de l’Ecole Egyptienne,” p. 27 ff.
- 31 Khoury, R.G. (1986) “‘Abd Allāh Ibn Lahī’a,” p. 26 ff., 31 f., where this passage of the Dhahabī is analysed; *idem*, (1994) “L’apport de la papyrologie dans la transmission et codification des premières versions des Mille et Une Nuits,” p. 21-33; *idem* (1993) “Kalif, Geschichte und Dichtung: Der jemenitische Erzähler ‘Abīd Ibn Šarya am Hofe Mu’āwiyas,” p. 204-218; *idem* (1997) “Les grands centres de conservation et de transmission des manuscrits arabes aux premier et deuxième siècles de l’Hégire,” p. 215-226; *idem* (1998) “Geschichte oder Fiktion. Zur erzählerischen Gattung der ältesten Bücher über Arabien,” p. 370-387; *idem* (2000) “Die Erzähltradition im Islam, Islam – eine andere Welt?” p. 23-40; *idem* (2004) “L’apport spécialement important de la papyrologie dans la transmission et la codification des plus anciennes versions des *Mille et Une Nuits* et d’autres livres des deux premiers

him. Thus, taking the new situation described by al-Dhahabī and others into account, these authors no longer use the term *Hadīth* as the title of their joint work: a systematic transition and above all codification of an increasingly wider science automatically required a more specific terminology for many genres, whose names had become too general and undifferentiated in an empire which had grown in size and in which writing had become a necessary instrument of societal intercourse, which al-Qalqashandī aptly and succinctly characterizes as follows: *Al-kitābatau ussu l-mulki wa-'imādu l-mamlakati*³² (“Writing is the foundation stone of government and the mainstay of the empire”).

Hence the need for specialization and structure based on areas and genres, to which al-Dhahabī’s texts refers. Therefore everything which is still titled and formulated like the aforementioned papyruses is older than the version of the book by ‘Umāra and his father Wathīma and must originate from the time of the Heidelberg papyruses, which more or less originate from the collection of the Egyptian judge ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Lahī’a (97-174/715-790). It must not be forgotten that the latter collected many originals and copies of originals in his unique private library and used to make them available to Egyptian students and guests and to all of the transmitters of the Heidelberg papyruses and, of course, to the aforementioned Wathīma, whose text transmitters, to whom his son refers, were Egyptians and students of the same Egyptian judge, Ibn Lahī’a. This Wathīma adopted from the direct students of the judge in Fustāt (old Cairo) the material for his histories of the prophets but had to take into account the new scientific development, the systematic reception and written recording of the scientific texts.³³

Let us now return to the text by ‘Ubayd Ibn Sharya. In accordance with the above-quoted formula, the report opens with precise information on the years of government of Caliph Mu’āwiya: ten years as “emir” under each of the three last orthodox Caliphs ‘Umar and ‘Uthmān – ‘Alī is not mentioned by name – and then twenty further years as *Amīr al-mu`minīn* (“Prince of the Faithful”). What is interesting is that his authority and some of his habits and innovations are described in this way:

His authority was significant as *wa-dānat lahu l-mashāriqu wa-l-maghāribu* (“the east and the west were under his rule”). For this, he had “reached the high

siècles islamiques,” p. 70 ff. Also Al-Djābirī, M. (1984) “*Takwīn al-‘aql al-‘arabī*,” p. 61 ff., this book was not available to me at the time; I was only familiar with the opinion of al-Djābirī through the criticism made of him by Tarābīshī, Georges (1998) “*Ishkāliyyāt al-‘aql al-‘arabī*,” 11 ff.

32 On this, see al-Qalqashandī “*Subh al-a’shā*,” I, 37, 11; see also this entire page on which the author presents everything that was said about the importance of writing.

33 On this, see Khoury, R.G. (1997) “L’importance des plus vieux manuscrits arabes historiques sur papyrus, conservés à Heidelberg, pour l’histoire de la langue arabe et de la culture des premiers siècles islamiques,” p. 11-18.

honour of kingship ... was the first to become king (in Islam), claimed a ruler's lodge and leaned on his head when he prostrated himself in prayer and collected the monies."³⁴ This is a noteworthy passage which earns attention in the reference works on the period of government of the caliph due to the age of the text, as reference is often made to al-Dhahabī, who quotes Mu'āwiya's famous comment: *Anā awwalu malikin (fī- l-Islāmi)* ("I am the first King of Islam").³⁵

Only after this does the narrator lead us to one of the greatest joys of the aged ruler which revives a typical old-Arabian tradition, lends it a unique dimension and is represented as follows:

Wa-kānat afdala ladhdhātihi fī ākhiri 'umrihi al-musāmaratu wa-ahādīthu man madā ("His preferred delight at the end of his life was the nocturnal conversations and tales of early people").³⁶ This clearly demonstrates the personal interest of the Umayyads – starting with their founder – for history, tradition and, of course, for the hence indispensable poetry, as can be observed below.³⁷

It is relatively easy to establish the period in the life of Mu'āwiya, in which these nights, which in their general scope function as forerunners of the Tales from 1001 Nights, occurred with 'Ubayd as court story-teller: the reference to Mu'āwiya's ally, 'Amr Ibn al-'Ās, which always occurs when a caliph to be paid tribute to is mentioned,³⁸ is helpful here, as this conqueror of Egypt remained loyal to Mu'āwiya to the end. And, thus, he speaks in Ibn Sharya's book after all the aforementioned information about Mu'āwiya had already been stated, to give the latter advice to select this Yemeni for this task at the court in Damascus. The narrator is referred to as follows here: *Min baqāya man madā fa-innahu adraka mulūka l-Djāhiliyyati wa-huwa a'lamu man baqīya l-yauma fī ahādīthi l-'Arabi wa-ansābihā, wa-ausafihu li-mā marra 'alayhi min tasārīfi l-dahri*³⁹ ("[He is] of the people left over from before, as he experienced the kings of the old Arabian era and is the most experienced of those who remain in the stories of the Arabs and their genealogies, the most capable in representing the ups and downs of fate that befell him").

This description was suitable to satisfy the wish of the caliph, particularly as it originated from his particularly close emir. 'Amr was not only the conqueror of

34 'Ubayd Ibn Sharya (1347/928, n. Ed. 1978) "*Akhbār*," p. 312, 4 ff.

35 See, for example, El², VII, p. 263, 2 ff., and other authors who often quote a statement by al-Dhahabī (1986) "*Sīyar a'lām al-nubalā'*," III, p. 119 ff., 131 and, above all, 157 where he says: "*anā awwalu l-mulūki*" etc.

36 'Ubayd Ibn Sharya (1978) "*Akhbār*," 312, 7-8.

37 See also, what Abbott, Nabia (1957) periovulsy highlighted on these characteristics, "Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri, I, Historical Texts," p. 14 ff.

38 See, for example, Abbott, Nabia (1972) "Studies Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri, III. Language and Literature." Document 3: "A Speech of 'Amr Ibn al-'Ās and Description of the Ideal Maiden," p. 43-78, the Arabic text is eleven lines long.

39 'Ubayd Ibn Sharya (1347/1928, n. Ed. 1978) "*Akhbār*," p. 312, 8-10.

Egypt, but also its first governor; he was deposed by ʿUthmān⁴⁰ because he wanted to rule all of Egypt against the will of this caliph, but was then reconfirmed in this role for his lifetime by Muʿāwīya. However, he died in 63/663 or a year earlier.⁴¹ However, if ʿAmr turned to Muʿāwīya in connection with the advice about the story-teller, it must have been between 660, the date of the seizure of power by the ruler, and 663, the year of the death of Ibn al-ʿās; in the text, the caliph speaks with ʿUbayd in the presence of the ʿAmr, thus, this account must be taken seriously.⁴² The text does not report of any kind of hesitancy on the part of the caliph as he sent for the Yemeni story-teller immediately and expressed “a great longing” (*shiddat shauq*), to meet him at his house having had him brought to him “in a sedan” (*fī mahmalin*) and “after (a journey) of many days” (*baʿda ayyāmin kathīratin*); these references are intended to convey the sense of a particular honour and the length of the journey involved.⁴³ The external framework comes with the description of the person of the guest at the end: *Fa-dakhala ʿalayhi shaykhun kabīru l-sinni saḥīhu l-badani thābitu l-ʿaqli muntabihun dharibu l-lisāni ka-annahū l-djada ʿu*⁴⁴ (“A venerable old man came to him with a healthy body and confident mind, observant and with a sharp tongue as though he were a younger man”).

In summary, what we have here is a very old man who is counted among the long-lived (*al-muʿammarūn*) by al-Sidjistānī (died 250/864) and about whose longevity fabulous information is provided.⁴⁵ To the question of Muʿāwīya regarding the advanced age which the narrator puts at 150 years, the Caliph replies:

Fa-qāla la-hu Muʿāwīya wa-mā adrakta qāla adraktu yauman fī athari yaumin wa-laylatan fī athari laylatin (“What have you experienced; and he answered: I have lived day by day and night by night”). A series of wise observations and sayings follow further questions which he linked with a few verses about a burial which he described as a strange experience. Yāqūt ends his study on ʿUbayd here with the information of the index of books (*Fihrist*) by Ibn al-Nadīm, who provided more or less the same account of this encounter with the caliph, although we also learn from him that the author of the *Akhbār* lived up to the days of the Umayyads – Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik Ibn Marwān (685-705) – and

40 On Caliph ʿUthmān, see my article in: EI² (2000: pp. 946-949), which takes all of the circumstances of his period of rule into account in the light of Ibn Lahīʿa’s Heidelberg papyrus.

41 On this point, see Khoury, R.G. (1986) “ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Lahīʿa,” p. 91-93.

42 ʿUbayd Ibn Sharya (1978) “*Akhbār*,” p. 313, 11.

43 Loc. cit., p. 313, 11-12.

44 Loc. cit., p. 312-313.

45 al-Sidjistānī, Sahl Ibn Muhammad Ibn ʿUthmān Abū Hātim “*Kitāb al-Muʿammarīn*,” p. 40-43.

left two books behind: *Kitāb al-Amthāl* (“Book of Proverbs”) and *Kitāb al-Mulūk wa-akhbār al-mādīn* (“Book about the Kings and Reports of the Early Ones”).⁴⁶

Of course, ‘Ubayd’s account of the text is more detailed, the later information however acts as another guarantee of the age of such information.

What the caliph expected from his guest in terms of a programme is simple and clearly formulated in one sentence: *Innī aradtu ttikhādhaka mu`addiban lī wa-samīran wa-muqawwiman. Wa-anā bā`ithun ilā ahlika wa-anquluhum ilā djiwārī wa-kun lī samīran fī laylī wa-wazīran fī amrī.*⁴⁷ (“I wanted you as a story-teller for me, as a nocturnal story-teller and advisor. And I will send for your family and bring them to me. Be an evening story-teller for me in my nights and a vizier in my affairs”).

Together with the other sources quoted, this reference demonstrates the extent of Mu`āwiya’s interest in education, the word *Mu`addib* is used in the text, which he associates with pleasant conversation; we can see here how old the aforementioned concept of *Adab* is, which entered common usage with Ibn al-Muqaffā’ in the Islamic culture of the 2nd/8th century.⁴⁸ The caliph makes no secret of the fact that the presence of the story-teller in his surroundings gives him great joy which is expressed not least by the warm reception the guest receives at his court:

*Fa-anzalahu fī qurbīhi wa-akhdamahu ... wa-wassa’a ‘alayhi wa-alfafahu – fa-idhā kāna dhālīka fī waqti l-samari fahwa samūruhu fī khāssatihi min ahli baytihi.*⁴⁹

(“And he had him accommodated and looked after near to him ... and he was generous and friendly to him – as soon as the time for nocturnal conversation came, [‘Ubayd] was his nocturnal conversation partner in his private circle among the people of his house”).

From then on the caliph’s relationship with the story-teller assumed different dimensions which are no longer purely historical in nature, but also cultural as the nocturnal conversations and the poetry closely associated with them predominated. Thus it is appropriate to analyse the other events in this book from this perspective. The same applies for the *Kitāb al-Tīdjān*, whose content is far more religious and biblical in nature. Thus, all of these questions regarding the content will now be examined from the perspective of wisdom and spirituality.

46 Yāqūt, (1928) *Irshād*, V, p. 12 (the report on the story-teller is on pages 10 to 13 with some small additions); the author follows here the information provided in Ibn al-Nadīm’s *Fihrist*, ed. by Fluegel, p. 89-90.

47 ‘Ubayd Ibn Sharya (1978) “*Akhbār*,” 313, 1-3.

48 On this point, see above on *Adab* and the author referred to there.

49 ‘Ubayd Ibn Sharya (1978) “*Akhbār*,” p. 313, 5-7.

II. The wisdom and spirituality of abiblical and prophetic yemeni tales in Early Islam

Such books represent a summary of the experience of earlier peoples who should all be considered in the context of the Semitic tradition of wisdom, a tradition which reached its apotheosis in the biblical world in particular in such religious stories of the pious, virtuous and heroes of their nations. Thus the stories about the Prophet belong to the above-described stories which were widely disseminated in Islam from an early stage and provided Qur'an commentaries on the varied figures, as stories and explanations. Some typically Arabian figures which enjoyed great adulation in Arabia prior to Mohammed, were assimilated into the Judaeo-Christian repertoire; one example of this can be found in the above-mentioned Heidelberg Arabian papyrus on the Story of David while another represents the life of the founder of the religion which for reasons of adulation was not dealt with in these actual collections but separately under *Sīra* (path through life, life story) or *Maghāzī* (campaigns) (which more or less represents the same thing).⁵⁰ All of the book collections referred to want ultimately to report on the past which was a shared biblical asset and which there was a desire to closely correlate with the Arabian past. We can see how important an author was who dealt with all of these text types and correlated the old Arabian, i.e. Yemeni, biblical and Islamic past, initially in orally transmitted versions which were transferred to written form gradually, but at an early stage. The case of the library of the above-mentioned Egyptian judge and what remains to be said about Ibn Sharya's book confirms all of these views.

To re-enact this step by step, I shall start with Ibn Hishām's book, *Kitāb al-Tidjān*, whose content is primarily traced back to Wahb Ibn Munabbih.⁵¹ Wahb opens the speech by specifying the number of books he had read and which he distributed among eleven prophets, starting with Adam and ending with the Prophet of Islam. In the meantime, it may be assumed that an Arabic bible was known in early Islam – even if its parts were not equally disseminated or only some of them which quote Islamic authors – as was also the Thora and some passages from the gospels. This availability cannot be disputed after detailed consideration of the information which goes back to the transmitters of the first hour. These transmitters are the main authorities, to whom Ibn Munabbih refers and whose material was recorded in writing in the circle of this family and in Egypt:

50 On the publication of both texts, see Khoury, R.G. (1972) "Wahb Ibn Munabbih," I, p. 33 ff., 117 ff.; on all other figures, see, for example, Khoury, R.G. (1978) "Les légendes prophétiques dans l'Islam" (in Arabic).

51 At the beginning of the text, this author is almost the only authority, to whom Ibn Hishām refers, sometimes several times on individual pages; the frequency of these references decreases after the first third of the book; on this point, see. loc. cit., p. 2 ff.

Ka'b al-Ahbār (died 32/632 or 34/654) and 'Abd Allāh Ibn Salām (died 43/663).⁵² Wahb, who unlike the other two was not a convert from Judaism to Islam (he was born a Muslim), but was mistakenly viewed as such by Ibn al-Nadīm and also by Ibn Khaldūn after him, used their experience and tradition and expanded them to become the main source of biblical stories in Islam for subsequent generations up to Ibn Qutayba (828-889).⁵³ One of my doctoral students presented a detailed doctoral thesis on this author and the bible which corroborates the extreme significance of the Old and New Testaments for the Islamic generations.⁵⁴ Thus, it is not surprising to find in this classical author's work priority being given to Ibn Munabbih, who is credited with having most experience with biblical material in the numerous quotes and not only in his prophetic and Israeli stories,⁵⁵ but also because he is also credited with the translation of part of the bible: *Kitāb Zabūr Dāwūd* (the Psalms of David) which confirms his reputation as a guarantee of the biblical wisdom and spirituality. This must finally be taken into account so that this early Islamic material, which was later considered as purely Islamic without any mention of sources and – even worse – contested, is taken seriously not only in the East but also here in the West.

It should not come as a shock to establish on closer examination of this material that the treatment of these biblical sources did not (always) correspond to the norms of systematic transmission as more or less literal quotes were replaced by quotes that were looser and more Islamic in form.⁵⁶ Thus, Wahb became the model for the subsequent generations, but also *persona non grata* for many historians, including Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406), who viewed him as *djuhāl al-mu'arrikhīn* ("one of the ignorant historians"): this Islamic historian speaks of the Muslims of the Israelites (*Muslimat Banī Isrā'īl*) and cites the two aforementioned and Wahb by name in connection with the Qur'an commentaries; in these commentaries he highlights the fact that *there are things which were transmitted after then*, of which some elements should be retained and others discarded. He explains this with reference to the ignorance of the Arabians on these parts of old biblical history, on the one hand, and the presence – among the early Islamic scholars – of Jews (and Christians), on the other, who knew more about it and were therefore repeatedly called on. His openness in this regard is startling be-

52 On Ka'b, see F. Sezgin (1967) "Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums," I, p. 304 f.; EI², IV, p. 316 f.; on Ibn Salām, see F. Sezgin, loc. cit., p. 304; EI², I, p. 52.

53 On this author, see EI², III, p. 844-847 (Gérard Lecomte), idem (1965) "Ibn Qutayba. L'homme et l'œuvre."

54 Karoui, Said (1998) "Die Rezeption der Bibel im Werke des Ibn Qutayba," Heidelberg/Tunis.

55 On this point, see Khoury, R.G. (1972) "Wahb B. Munabbih," pp. 222-240, 246, 257.

56 On this point, see Khoury, R.G. (1989) "Quelques réflexions sur la première ou les premières Bibles arabes," p. 549-561. And Karoui, Said (1998) (see bibliography) with further bibliographical references.

cause he explains this circumstance as follows: *the Arabians had no books and no science, the character of the nomad and illiterate dominated among them;*⁵⁷ for this reason people turned to the people of the writings (Jews and Christians) on all questions regarding Creation and the secrets of existence. However, these scholars who were well-versed in the bible were also residents of the desert: all they knew about these questions was what was widely known in their milieu which was far removed from the major scholarly centres of their faiths. When they converted to Islam, most of these scholars who originated from Yemen did not give up their religious and cultural tradition and continued to explain it to the Islamic scholars, however in their own way. Thus numerous accounts of Creation and the stories or histories of the Prophets were adopted and can now be found not only in purely historical works, but also in the early Qur'anic commentaries; al-Tabarī's Qu'ran commentary is full of them and, to the delight of interested researchers, often accompanied by *Isnād*. These unique collections of reports from the first centuries of Islam are so valuable that they should be classified and analysed in greater detail.⁵⁸ Thus the true motives for the availability of this Judaeo-Christian literature in this form were ignorance, on the one hand, and more knowledge and respect, on the other. These are surely also the reasons why certain parts of the bible and biblical stories were more widely disseminated in the desert (Thora, Psalms, Gospel of St Matthew etc.), while others were hardly known or completely unknown.

It should not be forgotten here that, in such an environment, change did not always only originate from the desire to please the rulers under the religious and political imperatives of apologism; to this was also added simple uncertainty because people had blind trust in scholars in these early intellectually underdeveloped environments. The role of the scholars was almost equivalent to that of the poets and oracle men of old Arabia who had to provide answers for everything, irrespective of whether they had understood it (correctly) or not. This mentality can still be observed today in certain areas. Based on this, it is possible to imagine just how much was ascribed to such a scholar who, in the person of Wahn, represented a major cosmopolitan personality for his epoch and the first generations of Islam. Not only did this Yemeni-Islamic dimension, which was very closely associated with the biblical tradition, live on in him, but also something of his Persian past, as his grandfather had come to Yemen in 570 AD with the conquering Persian army. Thus, he belonged to the *Abnā'*, a name given to the

57 On Ibn Khaldūn's views of this *Muslimat Banī Isrā'īl* (the Islamic scholars of the sons of Israel), see Houry, R.G. (1987) "Ibn Khaldūn et quelques savants des deux premiers siècles islamiques," p. 192-204.

58 Al-Tabarī took them very seriously, just like Ibn Qutayba who was one of his most important sources in this area. See Houry, R.G. (1972) "Wahn B. Munabbih;" on al-Tabarī and his commentary, see Gilliot, Claude (1990) "Exégèse, langue et théologie en Islam. L'exégèse coranique de Tabarī."

Persians and their descendants, who settled in Yemen after its conquest by the Sassanid rulers.⁵⁹ As a result his work is all the more interesting as it betrays a Persian character which includes the experience of this ancient people who are repeatedly referred to in connection with the work of Ibn Munabbih. Thus, it is possible to establish that concepts like education and wisdom permeate the two above-analysed works on Yemen: in Ibn Sharya's book, the desire for political education is clearly perceptible and in the case of Wahb, in Ibn Hishām's book, the focus is on the area of wisdom and its proverbs which cannot always be dissociated from the general biblical tradition.

Seen in this light, Ibn Munabbih emerges as a scholar to whom early Islamic history has much to thank for key stimuli which lend it its world-history dimensions:

First, the old-Arabian history, that of the Yemenis, from the beginning of their existence to the end of the Himyarite dynasty, which *Kitāb al-Tīdjān* preserved on several occasions. To reinforce this in religious terms, the history of the Prophets was added, and this is clearly demonstrated not only the Story of David on papyrus but also the most important elements of the collection of Wathīma and his son 'Umāra in *Bad' al-khalq wa-qisas al-anbiyā`*.

To this old pre-Islamic and biblical-Islamic past is added a purely Islamic one, i.e. the focus on the life of the Islamic prophet Mohammed to whom Ibn Munabbih devoted the oldest surviving *Maghāzī*, a title which was interchangeable with the *Sīra*. Whereas in *Kitāb al-Mulūk al-mutawwadja ...*, which provided the basis for Ibn Hishām's book and aimed to provide indisputable proof of the link between the old-Arabian and Yemeni history and biblical history, the *Maghāzī* crown these efforts with an Islamic high, i.e. the seal of the biblical tradition. However, this is not all that we know about Wahb as there is even mention of a book of his about the first caliph *Tārīkh al-khulafā`* or *Futūh*, whose traces are not as clear, however, as clear as the previously mentioned works. It is surprising, that it was he and not Ibn Ishāq, his student and teacher of Ibn Hishām, who was responsible for the extension of the historical dimensions by converting the purely Arabian and Islamic perspectives into a worldly one.

Thus his services were immense in terms linking Islamic history, with respect to its spirituality, with the oriental and, above all, biblical past, a tradition which became even stronger after him and gained ground in the ascetic and mystical spirituality in Islam. Several books ascribed to him and numerous statements and paragraphs which are closely associated with them can be cited here. The titles are:

Hikmat Wahb (The Wisdom of Wahb)

Hikmat Luqmān (The Wisdom of Luqmān)

Mau'iza l-Wahb (A Sermon by Wahb)⁶⁰

59 On the *Abnā`*, see EI², I, 102; Khoury, R.G. (1972) "Wahb B. Munabbih," p. 9, 189 ff.

60 On the titles of these works, see Khoury, R.G., op. cit, p. 206 f., 263-272.

In addition, the aforementioned titles *Kitāb Zabūr Dāwūd*⁶¹ (Psalms of David), one *Tafsīr Wahb* (Wahb's Qu'ran commentary) and *Kitāb al-Qadar* (Book on Freedom of Will) should not be forgotten here.

He is reputed to have written or transmitted this last work, from which he retrospectively distanced himself, but which probably cost him his life.⁶² We know that the Umayyad power ideology was increasingly involved in combating the enemies of its usurpation of power and had to stand up for the associated freedom-based discussions which received particular input from those surrounding freedom of will; for this reason, not only Ghaylān al-Dimashqī (died after 724)⁶³ but also Wahb had to die in 728 or 732, thus approximately at the same time, the first as Christ on the Cross and the second by corporal punishment in San'ā'. The traditions which were added to these and can be traced back to Ibn Munabbih are fully enveloped in a biblical atmosphere and promote such liberal opinions. These and other moral characteristics of Ibn Munabbih increasingly irritated the tyrannical governor of Yemen, Yūsuf Ibn 'Umar al-Thaqafī (died 745 AD),⁶⁴ who was enslaved to the Umayyads, thus he welcomed the death of the scholar.⁶⁵

In this context, it must be stressed that of the early Islamic scholars, Wahb became a particularly important source on wisdom, wise proverbs and spirituality, thus many later authors repeatedly quoted him; thus, it is possible to find sentences like the following: *Fī ba'di l-hikmati* (in a wisdom) and *qara'tu fī l-hikmati* (I read in the wisdom) etc. which can be traced back to one of the above-mentioned titles, in particular that on David and on Luqmān. It is not possible to differentiate between *Hikma* and *Mau'iza* in the assembled literature referring to him: the style and content of such statements are largely reminiscent of the genre of publications by Cheikho and Krarup,⁶⁶ that is of a common heritage of devotional messages relating to way of life. It appears to be clear that Wahb used all available oral and written sources and disseminated them in an adapted form. In relation to Luqmān, whose legend assumes an honorary position in the oldest surviving collection of historical terms, the book of the above mentioned Wathīma and 'Umāra al-Fārisī,⁶⁷ Wahb was one of the most important authorities on all matters concerning spirituality and the Psalms. Based on some statements, it would appear that a *Madjallat Luqmān* (which more or less means *Sahīfa/leaf*)

61 Khoury, R.G., op. cit, 258-263.

62 Op. cit., 270-272.

63 On Ghaylān, see van Ess, Josef (1970) "Les Qadarites et la 'ahlāniyya de Yazīd," p. 269-286.

64 He was one of the relatives of the famous Governor of Iraq and Hedja, al-Hadjdjādī Ibn Yūsuf (died 714) who belonged to the same tribe.

65 On the death of Wahb, see Khoury, R.G. (1972) "Wahb B. Munabbih," p. 197-198.

66 On this point, see Cheikho, Louis (1910) "Quelques légendes islamiques apocryphes," p. 33-56; Khoury, R.G. (1972) "Wahb B. Munabbih," p. 266 ff.

67 On this, see Khoury, R.G. (1978) "Les légendes prophétiques dans l'Islam" (in Arabic), p. 180-222.

was circulating at the time of the Prophet Mohammed: Suwayd Ibn Sāmit from the al-Aus tribe, who was viewed as *Kāmil* (a perfect person) and like Wahb was known for the knowledge of the books, is reputed to have said to the Prophet, who had offered him conversion to the new religion, that he had *Madjallat Luqmān*, and read it to him on his request whereupon Mohammed recommended the Qu'ran to him as better.⁶⁸ Ibn Qutayba provides further witness in referring to Ibn Munabbih and informing us that this *Madjalla* was in circulation in the 1st/7th century:

*Qara`tu fī Hikmatihi nahwan min `asharati ālāfi bābin, lam yasma`i l-nāsu kalāman ahsana minhu thumma nazartu fa-ra`aytu l-nāsa qad adkhalūhu fī kalāmihim wa-sta`ānū bihi fī khutabihim wa-rasā`ilihim wa-wasalū bihi balāghatahum*⁶⁹
 (“I read in his wisdom around 10,000 chapters, whereby people had never before heard a more beautiful speech; then looked and found that people had introduced them into their speech, had used them to assist them in their addresses and included them in their letters”).

This testimony is clear, even without *Isnād*; for al-Tabarī also tells the story of the aforementioned Suwayd, this time with a full *Isnād*. What is interesting about this report is the fact that the *Madjalla* is expressly held as identical with the

*Hikma: Fa-qāla lahu Suwayd fa-la`alla lladhī ma`aka mithlu lladhī ma`ī fa-qāla lahu Rasūlu llāhi [...] wa-mā lladhī ma`aka qāla Madjallatu Luqmān ya`nī Hikmata Luqmān*⁷⁰
 (“Suwayd then said to him [the Prophet]: Is what you have like that which I have? God’s envoy replied to him: And what have you? He said: the sheet by Luqmān, i.e. The Wisdom of Luqmān”).

Wahb’s declaration appears to carry weight and highlights the significance of the material which has been put into circulation and is traced back to Luqmān. As southern Arabian, he belongs to the ‘ād tribe and was honoured as a hero and sage thus the Qur’an dedicated surah 31 to him⁷¹: without closer description of the person, reference is made in verse 12 of a *Hikma* by him which enabled Allah ‘to come to him’ and some good advice is mentioned which Luqmān had given to his own son.⁷² Based on what has been presented up to now on Wahb in connection with the material ascribed to Luqmān, it is obvious that this *Hikma* is probably the piece introduced into circulation by Wahb which D. Gutas men-

68 Abbott, Nabia (1967) “Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri, II, Qur`ānic Commentary and Tradition,” p. 5, 12 ff.

69 Ibn Qutayba (1960) “*al-Ma`ārif*”, p. 55, 8 ff.

70 Al-Tabarī, (1879) “Annales = *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*,” ed. by de Goeje, I, p. 1207, 2 ff.

71 On him, see Enzyklopädie des Islam (1913-38), here EI, III, 39.

72 Qur’an, 31, 12 ff.

tioned in “Classical Arabic Wisdom Literature,” in which my book about Wahb Ibn Munabbih is quoted extensively without, however, referring to the numerous pages on Luqmān in the book by Wathīma and his son, which represents the oldest known collection of material.⁷³

During and after his time, Wahb Ibn Munabbih was viewed, particularly in Yemeni history, as the “scholar of the world” who is supposed to have read all disclosed and undisclosed writings by his predecessors. He undoubtedly made a far from small contribution to the formation of several wisdoms from the biblical and old-Arabian periods, because the majority of the reports on Prophets and sages of this world go back to him, including, of course, about Luqmān Ibn ‘Ād, who succeeded his brother Shaddād Ibn ‘Ād on the throne of the Himyarites, in particular the story of the seven vultures with the events that accompanied his age and his death.⁷⁴ It was also Ibn Munabbih, who according to the famous Ibn ‘Abbās made Luqmān into a Prophet, however not without adding *ghayr mursal* (‘not dispatched’): “Islamic history loves to sanctify the pious and wise of the past as prophets,” particularly as the Qur’an ‘had sanctified Luqmān as the wise proverb poet, thus everything that was held as pious and reasonable could be imputed to him .”⁷⁵ Based on this, it may be understood that Wahb did not even hesitate to describe the prayer of his Yemeni prophet in the following way:

*Qāla Wahb wa-kāna Luqmān Ibn ‘ād yad’ū qabla kulli salātin wa-yaqūlu
Allāhumma yā rabba l-bihāri l-khudr
Wa-l-ardi dhāti l-nabti ba’da l-qtar
As’aluka ‘umran fauqa kulli ‘umr*⁷⁶

(“Wahb said: And Luqmān Ibn ‘ād used to call God before each prayer and say:
O God, O Lord of the green seas,
And of the earth which has plants after the rain,
I ask you for an age above every age”).

Thus – according to Ibn Hishām and Ibn Qutayba – Ibn Munabbih was probably familiar with Luqmān’s transmission of the legend. Wahb had already earned the reputation of *Hakīm* (wise man) during his time; thus, why should he not have adopted proverbs and warnings from the *Hukamā’*, who had lived before him – and without indicating his sources as was common in his time. What Wahb did not do, was completed by his successors and subsequent transmitters. However,

73 Gutas, D. (1981) “Arabic wisdom literature: nature and scope” p. 50-54, 57-58 (the entire article: p. 50-86); see Khoury, R.G. (1978) “Les légendes prophétiques dans l’Islam” (in Arabic), p. 180-222. My book was published in 1978 thus it could not be used on time.

74 Ibn Hishām, (1978) *Kitāb al-Tīdjān*, p. 69 ff.

75 B. Heller, Luqmān, EI, III, p. 39.

76 Ibn Hishām, (1978) *Kitāb al-Tīdjān*, p. 70, 5 ff.

the quotes that bear Wahb's name always remained within the Qur'anic concept of Luqmān's legend; Ibn Munabbih, the Yemeni, had done everything to completely integrate the pre-Islamic history of his homeland with the biblical tradition: his entire oeuvre prophesies these efforts at every turn and this became very clear, particularly in connection with *Kitāb al-Tidjān*. His preoccupation with the biblical stories to which the aforementioned story of David belongs, gave him a solid basis on which to establish such cross-connections in a convincing way. The two figures, i.e. the biblical figure of David and the old-Arabian figure of Luqmān, gave him *inter alia* the possibility of discovering a leitmotif in the oriental wisdom and spirituality and to present it to the Islamic and non-Islamic public. Thus, this applies not only for David, but also for Luqmān; in this way he could follow the path taken by the Qur'an, and in this way the ice was broken: "Once Muhammad had sanctified Luqmān as wise proverb poet, everything that was held as pious and reasonable could be imputed to him."⁷⁷

When we examine some places which Ibn Munabbih introduces with Luqmān's name, we gain the impression that they belong to the same literary genre as the quotes supposedly ascribed to David which are usually introduced with the formula *yā Dāwūd* or *fī Hikmati Dāwūd*, in Luqmān with *qāla Luqmān*, or *fī Mau'īāti/fī Hikmati Luqmān*, to make the generally quoted more or less authentic material appear more plausible.

III. Narrative tradition and poetic wisdom in Islam

Unlike the work of Ibn Hishām, we have precise information on the coming into being of the book of 'Ubayd, as it can be traced back to the wish of Caliph Mu'āwiya. The beginning of the book presents us with all of the circumstances that gave rise to Ibn Sharya coming to Damascus as presented above. What is important here is that the habits of the caliph and what gave him particular joy are presented. It is described as follows in the text: *Wa-kānat afdala ladhdhātihi fī ākhiri 'umrihi al-musāmaratu wa-ahādīthu man mada*⁷⁸ ("His preferred joy at the end of his life were the conversations and tales of earlier people").

Here we have a very old confirmation of Mu'āwiya's interest in the poetry, genealogy and history (*Ash'ār*, *Ansāb* and *Akhbār*) of the Arabians which numerous works would later confirm (such as those of al-Djāhiā). 'Amr Ibn al-'ās⁷⁹ is supposed to have proposed this very elderly and highly respected story teller who is introduced as follows by the conqueror of Egypt and best ally of the ca-

77 B. Heller, Luqmān, EI, III, p. 39.

78 *Ahbār 'Ubayd*, (1347/1928, n. Ed. 1978), p. 312, 7-8.

79 On 'Amr Ibn al-'ās, his importance for Islam and Egypt, see Khoury, R.G. (1986) "Abd Allāh Ibn Lahī'a," p. 91-93.

liph: he is “one of those left over from the early people as he experienced the kings of the old Arabian time and is the most experienced of those left behind today in the tales of the Arabians and their genealogies, the most skilled in the presentation of the ups and downs of fate that have befallen him.”⁸⁰ No description could have been more suited to satisfying the expectations of the caliph and his joy in the quest for knowledge, particularly as the recommendation came from ‘Amr. From the beginning, the story and joy in listening, which would have been impossible to satisfy through dry reports alone, are intertwined: thus, the imaginary was something that was taken for granted in these times and we therefore rediscover the same traits of the enchantment of the world, without which the religious-cultural dimension would be unimaginable.

Further on we read:

*Wa-kāna yuqassiru ‘alayhi laylahu wa-yudhhibu ‘anhu humūmahu wa-ansāhu ‘alā kulli samīrin kāna qablahu wa-lam yakhtur ‘alā bālihi shay’un qattu illā wadjada ‘indahu fīhi shay’an wa-farahan wa-marahan*⁸¹

(“It was ‘Ubayd who shortened the nights for Mu’āwiya, drove away his worries and made him forget (them) more than any other nocturnal entertainer who had been there before; nothing ever came into his mind for which ‘Ubayd did not manage to find something and also joy and mirth”).

The text contains informative pages which document the caliph’s great interest in the material and the history of its written recording. It continues as follows: *Kāna yuhaddithuhu waqā’i’a l-‘arabi wa-ash’ārahā wa-akhbārahā* (“‘Ubayd used to tell the caliph of the events of the Arabians, their poetry and news”). This ends, however, with the order to undertake the written documentation: *Amara ahla dī-wānihi wa-kuttābahu an yuwaqqi’ūhu wa-yudawwinūhu*⁸² (“Mu’āwiya ordered his Diwān officials to record it and write it down in books”), whereby Ibn al-Nadīm adds: *Wa-yansubūhu ilā ‘Ubayd Ibn Sharya*⁸³ (“and that it should be ascribed to the ‘U. Ibn Sh”).

Thus, here we have the entire framework which not only introduces this text but clarifies its historical and cultural dimensions, irrespective of whether this information corresponds to the historical reality fully or only in part. We are also dealing with material here which, like the biblical stories, was under the spell of the past of the higher powers: a historically-based folk literature, without which such a past is unimaginable and which should be carefully considered as a literary memorial.⁸⁴ In

80 Idem op. cit., p. 312, 8-10.

81 Idem op. cit., p. 313, 7-9.

82 Idem op. cit., p. 313, 9-10.

83 Ibn al-Nadīm (1871) “Fihrist,” 90.

84 On the significance of this literature for the research and reconstruction not only of early Islamic but also of Jewish and Christian circumstances, see the extremely im-

each case, in such books by Wahb Ibn Munabbih, Ibn Hishām and Ibn Sharya we have the oldest accounts of old Arabia which came into circulation from the beginning of the Umayyad period, initially orally and were recorded in writing at an early stage, at least in part. Somehow, with his strictly biblically-oriented structure *Kitāb al-Tidjān* represents a bridge to the content of 'Ubayd's *Ahbār* which is more narrative and substantiates and illustrates vividly the genre of the *Adab* and conversation sessions at the court of the Arabian-Islamic rulers and in addition to this the early interest of the Umayyads, at this point already Mu'āwiya, in education and entertainment. All of this was intended to express the pride of the Himyarites, above all Wahb, who was Himyarite through his mother and wanted to connect the Himyarites with the biblical past.⁸⁵ The quest for the wonderful was also a shared objective although the atmosphere of the reporting in Ibn Sharya's work is more Arabian because he constantly draws on the main element of old-Arabian culture, i.e. the poetry. This is almost the main sustaining motif,⁸⁶ as it includes almost half of the text and also has a completely different dimension in the narration and representational value of the events: for both the teller and the caliph it is above all proof of the veracity of the statements. Mu'āwiya expresses this constantly by asking 'Ubayd for proof from the poetry as, for example, in the following passages:

*Qāla Mu'āwiya: Sa'altuka a-lā shaddadta hadīthaka bi-ba'di mā qālū mina l-shi'ri wa-lau thalāthati abyātin*⁸⁷ ("Mu'āwiya said: I ask you can you not strengthen your story from that which they expressed in poetry, and if only in three verses"). And he asked about other events: *Fa-hal qīla fīhā sh'irun* ("Was something said about poetry"). However, as soon as verses were there, the caliph expressed his satisfaction to him and as a showed this by making such affirmative statements as: *Qulta l-sawāba ... wa-imna kalāmaka tayyibun wa-shifā'un li-mā fī l-sadri*⁸⁸ ("You said the right thing ... your speech is soothing and salvation for what is in the breast"). And elsewhere the caliph says: *sadaqta yā 'Ubayd wadji'ta bi-l-burhāni l-wādihi* ("You told the truth, 'Ubayd, and presented clear proof"); *La-qad dji'ta bi-l-burhāni fī hadīthika* ("You have brought the proof for your speech"), *Li-llāhi darruka fa-qad dji'ta bi-l-burhāni*⁸⁹ ("How excellent you are, you have brought the proof").

Many other passages demonstrate the caliph's hunger for confirmation of the events described, in particular through poetry. The book contains an often forgotten and misunderstood statement on the role of poetry in the historical representation of the old Arabians; it is put in Mu'āwiya's mouth who says:

portant book by Schwarzbaum, Haim (1982) "Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends in Islamic Folkliterature," Walldorf/Hessen.

85 On this point, see Khoury, R.G. (1972) "Wahb B. Munabbih," p. 287 ff.

86 Khoury, R.G. (1993) "Kalif, Geschichte und Dichtung," p. 217 ff.

87 Ibn Sharya (s. Ibn Hishām) (1978) "*Ahbār 'Ubayd*," p. 318, 6.

88 Idem op. cit., p. 323, 3-7.

89 Idem op. cit., p. 327, 8; 330, 12; 349, 4.

*Wa-qad 'alimtu anna l-shi'ra dīwānu l-'arabi wa-l-dalīlu 'alā ahādithā wa-af'ālihā wa-l-hākimu baynahum fī l-Djāhiliyyati wa-qad sami'tu Rasūla llāhi sallā llāhu 'alayhi wa-ālihi wa-sallama yaqūlu (inna mina l-shi'ri la-hikaman)*⁹⁰

(“I already knew that the poetry of the Arabians’ Dīwān was the proof of their reports and their deeds and the umpire between them in the *Djāhiliyya*; I also heard God’s envoy – God bless him and his house and grant him salvation – say: ‘Truly, (a lot of) wisdom comes from poetry’”).

It is not possible to state this any clearer: the extreme importance of poetry for old Arabia is highlighted here for all areas; at the same time, however, poetry in Islam was to be completely rehabilitated – following the turbulent statements of the Qur’an against it and the poets, and the statement which is normally ascribed to Abū ‘Amr Ibn al-‘Alā’ (689-770 AD) goes back to the highest authority in Islam. The particularly positive nature of the statement is highlighted first through the affirmative tone and then also by *lām al-ta’kīd* the last word (*la-hikaman*), which is even used in the plural to lend it greater strength. In my view, this precludes any restrictive interpretation, instead it is a very positive statement in support of the value of poetry which – from a religious perspective – cannot be an inferior societal product, in particular as it means so much for the old Arabians and contains their wisdom. Such a strong tradition is not allowed to disappear or be disparaged – in any case not if you are called Mu’wiya. The following generations, irrespective of the ruling family from which they originated, were supposed to observe this and give the poetic element a powerful place in their culture so that poetry became the best intrinsic product of this culture and presented all areas of its achievement in a masterful way.

IV. Old vivid narrative traditions in Early Islam before the 1001 Nights

Such verifiable accounts of the early Arabian-Islamic history and culture constitute a lively tradition for the subsequent generations of Islam: poetry became for them an indispensable element of their history and culture, thus one should always speak of “Poetry and Truth.” Poetry was supposed to infuse reality with a certain zest. All of the story tellers recognised this at an early stage thus they spread an Arabian-Islamic literature which was intended to catch on; for this reason they sought not only to educate – like the dry methods of the legal scholars – but to associate edification with amusement. These narrators were also story tellers; at that time it was impossible not to be. They delighted the spirit of high-ranking authors such as al-Djāhiā in particular through their “*facilité d’élocution*

90 *Idem op. cit.*, p. 352, 12-15.

et le charme de leur langage”⁹¹ (i.e. “facility of delivery and the charm of their language”) as Pellat puts it so succinctly. This last circumstance played an extremely important role in the spread of such stories about the past of Arabia, the bible etc. and the poetry helped them enormously. Thus, the story-tellers of these pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods were real champions of religious zeal and local patriotism which would guarantee their region, tribe etc. an influential place within the Islamic community in the context of the conflicts between northern and southern Arabia. This was also visible in the variety of the tribes, which everyone declares to have been the first of the Arabian tribes to have accepted Islam, in the different *Sīra* versions which survived in separate form or in large general historical works.⁹²

These story tellers in particular were successful transmitters of a literature which was highly valued as it embodied the literary spirit of the early generations, which in its popular erudition combined “the aims of entertainment” with those of “edification” Tory Andréa aptly describes the work of the best of them as follows: “A particular class of professional story-tellers, the *Qussās*, entertained its audience alternatively with secular fairy tales, biblical legends and glorious stories of the Prophets of Islam.”⁹³ Thus, it is most regrettable that this kind of literature finds little respect to the present day – particularly in the West – as it is omnipresent in most typically Arabian and Semitic genres and its transmitters were highly respected and particularly eloquent personalities. There are various reasons why with time this designation came to be associated with an increasing lack of respect which Pellat highlights: the main reason undoubtedly lies in the desire of the Islamic leadership not to lend any official approbation to foreign material which could be found in the speeches and reports of the story-tellers and originated from both the Judaeo-Christian and Iranian repertoires. However, every expert knows that the measures against such *Qussās* remained more or less unsuccessful as these story tellers who, were driven out of the mosques, continued to enjoy much adulation among the masses, more than the drier *Fuqahā`* (legal scholars), in particular as they were confident speakers and included some highly educated individuals who could even fascinate al-Djāhiz who was not easily satisfied.

This, in particular, must have played a very important role in the spreading of more or less historical reports on the Arabian past, in particular when these reports could be combined with suitable poems which lent the narration a particular stamp of authority. The early Islamic story-tellers “were firstly champions of re-

91 Pellat, Charles (1953) “Le milieu Basrien et la formation de Gahiz,” p. 110 ; EI², IV, 733/763 ff.

92 On this point, see Khoury, R.G. (1983) “Les sources islamiques de la ‘Sīra’ avant Ibn Hishām (mort 213/834) et leur valeur historique,” p. 7-29.

93 Andrae, Tor (1918) “Die Person Mohammeds in Lehre und Glauben seiner Gemeinde,” p. 26, 7 ff.

ligious fervour before the Islamic armies, like poets in the old days [...] Thus, they naturally became popular exegetes of the Qor`ān and public homilists who became story-tellers for religious purposes.”⁹⁴ That this profession was compared with that of the poet in the old days would come as no surprise to connoisseurs of the old-Arabian scene as the poet was the primary reference for all that concerned this past and poetry was seen “from time immemorial as the high point” of the culture of the Arabians and represented “for a long time virtually the only form of expression of artistic creation among the Arabians.”⁹⁵ It is impossible to understand the writing of poetry and telling of stories in Islam without bearing in mind their roots in old Arabia, however with the special religious emphasis that Islam introduced – in particular if one considers old Arabic literature in general which displays little or no religious content.

All of the official measures adopted to replace the story-tellers remained, therefore, unsuccessful as the latter, who had been banished from the mosques out of fear that they would undermine the religious contribution of Islam, continued their work outside of the mosques and, above all, continued to enthuse the masses. With them survived the authority of all kinds of stories of a fashionable nature, in particular collections such as that of the 1001 Nights, whose original material can be connected with the story-telling evenings of the Arabs, i.e. long before the adoption of Persian material in this area. In conclusion, I will now briefly summarize some contributions I have made in recent years on the significance of Arabic papyrology, i.e. of the Heidelberg texts and their specialized language, in the clarification, transmission and codification of this work:⁹⁶

1. The nocturnal art of story telling among the Arabs is confirmed early on. We have already seen its specialized language in the texts of Ibn Sharya, documented at least since Mu`āwiya although the genre is much older. Mu`āwiya literally said to his guest:

Innī aradtu ittikhādhaka mu`addiban lī wa-samīran wa-muqawwiman ... Wa-kun lī samīran fī laylī wa-wazīran fī amrī

(“I wanted you as a story-teller for me, as a nocturnal story-teller and advisor ... Be a nocturnal story-teller in my nights and a vizier in my affairs”).

This is the framework of what became the beginning and end of entertainment and education at the time of the subsequent caliphs.

2. A precedent was also set in other collections for entertainment and edifica-

94 Macdonald, D.B., EI, II, p. 1120.

95 On this point, see Wagner, E. (1987) “Grundzüge der klassischen arabischen Dichtung, I, Die altarabische Dichtung,” p. 1 ff.

96 Khoury, R.G. (1994) “L’apport de la papyrologie dans la transmission et codification des premières versions des Mille et Une Nuits,” p. 21-33 ; *ibid.* (2004) “L’apport spécialement important de la papyrologie ...,” p. 81 ff.

tion, like the 1001 Nights, whose parts also betray early-Arabian characteristics and undoubtedly bear the Umayyad hallmark: as the oldest version of the book, which assumed its final form much later, we have, of course, the fragment on paper published by Nabia Abbott in 1949,⁹⁷ which must surely date to earlier than 266/879. The fragment is on two sheets, which contain pages 3 and 4 of the short text of 1001 Nights. Everything else is completely linked with a legal witness statement; Abbott notes that the witness Ahmad Ibn Mahfūz scribbles the date of the statements several times and writes: “Fifteen separate entries of the legal formula exclusive of the several scattered phrases of the same. Seven of these entries provided a complete date, four of which are still preserved in full.”⁹⁸ Lucid words which clearly prove that this is the date of the statements but never that of a literary text: the documents on papyrus and paper in the framework of papyrology show it clearly. The date 266 H is, therefore, “*a terminus ante quem* for the earlier date of the *Alf Lailah*.”

3. Another papyrus fragment published by Nabia Abbott in 1972 is of key importance due to its unknown connection to 1001 Nights and confirms just one early-Arabian characteristic of this work: what is involved here is the fragment on the portrait of the “ideal maiden” (*Al-djāriya l-mithāliyya*).⁹⁹ It is unimportant here whether or not it is possible to establish on closer examination a link between these few lines here and some passages of the great portrait of *Tawaddud* or other figures in the 1001 Nights, the genre and type of description of an “ideal maiden” was already highly Arabian in nature there too. In the papyrus we have two small parts, each of which consists of a few lines: ‘Amr Ibn al-‘Ās opens the speech in the first part to draw the attention of the *Umma* to the fundamental role of the caliph in their lives (this can only have been Mu‘āwiya, particularly as we know how important an ally of the conqueror of Egypt ‘Amr was for his caliph). The aforementioned portrait can be found in the second part, from line 7 on. The linking of the papyrus with the name of ‘Amr Ibn al-‘Ās is a guarantee of its age, in particular as we could establish above in Ibn Sharya’s text the role of the governor in the coming into being of the tales at the court of Mu‘āwiya. However, the papyrus does not originate from the time of the caliph, as it was transmitted by Ya‘qūb Ibn ‘Atā’ Ibn Abī Rabāh (died 155/771), whom Abbott was unable to identify and hence chronologically locate with accuracy. For this reason, she wrote: “Ya‘qūb may or may not have long survived his aged scholarly father, ‘Atā’ b. Abī Rabāh who died in 114/732.” Due to the uncertainty regarding the dating of this papyrus she added: “Nevertheless, the papyrus could as well be

97 Abbott, Nabia (1949) “A ninth-century fragment of the ‘Thousand Nights.’ New light on the early history of the Arabian Nights,” pp. 129-164.

98 Idem op. cit. p. 141b, 143a.

99 Idem (1972) “Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri III. Language and Literature, Dokument 3: A Speech of ‘Amr Ibn al-‘Ās and Description of the Ideal Maiden,” p. 43-78.

from Ya'qūb's hand as from that of a younger second – century transmitter.”¹⁰⁰ However, Ya'qūb died in 155 H. – i.e. in the beginning of the Abbasid period and his material goes back to the period of the conqueror of Egypt where the origin of the – at least orally circulating – material should be sought and betrays an old, early-Islamic tradition in terms of the type of narration.

4. This fragment on the “ideal maiden” dates, therefore, from the middle or beginning of the second half of the 2nd/8th century and not from the last quarter of this century; at most from the last years of Ya'qūb and its roots go back much further. The first aforementioned fragment on the 1001 Nights must also be dated earlier as 266 should be viewed not as its date but as that of the witness statements. Thus, both fragments can only be considered in connection with the terminology which occurs in the title of the Heidelberg story of David on papyrus and reads: *Hadīth Dāwūd*, dating from the year 229/844. It was, however, the version of an older original as I have proven on several occasions. Also the version of the *Akhbār* by 'Ubayd Ibn Sharya. All of them used the word *Hadīth* for the fashionable story in the title or title area, whose use in the title of such story books disappeared with the first half of the III/9th century and were reserved for the purely Islamic tradition.¹⁰¹ The *Kitāb Bad' al-khalq wa-qisas al-anbiyā'* transmitted by 'Umāra Ibn Wathīma al-Fārisī (died 289/902) after his father Wathīma Ibn Mūsā Ibn al-Furāt al-Fārisī, the actual author of the work, provides us with the best proof of this: Wathīma died in the year 237/851, i.e. seven to eight years after the date of the Heidelberg Story of David from which he copied word for word. His work could no longer bear the title *Hadīth*, because a more specific terminology was required for many genres in the course of the systematic transition and, above all, codification of a science that had become vast; an ever increasing realism in which the written form had become a necessary instrument of traffic automatically required a specialization as already stressed in detail above. Hence the emergence of this order based on areas, genres. As a result, everything that is titled and formulated like the papyruses is older than the version of Wathīma al-Fārisī's book and must date back to the period of the Heidelberg papyruses which more or less originate from the collection of the Egyptian judge 'Abd Allāh Ibn Lahī'a (97-174/715-790) who collected originals and copies of originals in his unique private library and used to make them available to Egyptian students and guests, who included all transmitters of the Heidelberg papyruses and Wathīma himself. The latter received the material at least from the immediate students of the judge in Fustāt (old Cairo) and had to take into account the development, systematic reception and written recording of the sciences.

100 Idem op. cit. p. 78, 13-15; on this point, see Khoury, R.G. (1994) “L'apport de la papyrologie,” p. 29 ff.

101 Khoury, R.G., op. cit. 30-33.

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