Title:

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1. Introduction: Arabic literature and factuality

Arabic literature is without a doubt one of the most prolific and multifaceted world literatures and looks back to a history of nearly 1600 years. This fact is inseparable from the notable career of Arabic as a language of prestige and religion. Initially, there are several scattered epigraphic attestations of Arabic dated to the fourth century CE. After the blossoming of oral poetry in Arabia in the fifth and sixth centuries, its written and spoken manifestations gained significant momentum with the rise of Islam and the Quran in the early seventh century, and later expanded extensively in the wake of the so-called Islamic Conquests in the seventh and eighth centuries. From the tenth century onwards, Arabic has functioned as a transcultural *koiné,* written in a standardized form of high prestige ("Classical Arabic," as opposed to various oral vernacular forms) and utilized by a vast variety of ethnic groups (by Arabs, but also Berbers, Iranians, Kurds, Turks, Indians and Africans) and of different religions (Muslims, but also Jews and Christians) who lived in a large belt stretching from the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa via the Middle East all the way up to Iran. The richness and diversity of textual Arabic production cannot be overemphasized. It found expression in poetry, prose literature, philology of poetic works, rhetoric, historiography, but also in scientific, philosophical, and theological genres, and that was fueled by the early use of paper since the late eighth century. Modern Standard Arabic, a slightly modified version of Classical Arabic, is still the language of prestige in the entire Arabic world, functioning as a linguistic medium of communication in the area that, roughly, stretches from Morocco to Iraq. It also serves as a second language in various regions of Africa and Asia. Most importantly, Arabic continues to be employed as the religious lingua franca for all Muslims all over the world.

The extraordinary vastness of Arabic literature, overwhelming even when one restricts oneself to the Pre-Modern period and the classical literature written by Muslims (as I will do in this chapter), makes it almost impossible to arrive at general and verifiable statements about factuality in Arabic literature. There are, in addition, two crucial difficulties that cannot be resolved in the framework of this text. The first and most basic problem is that of translation. To establish which Arabic words and corresponding concepts could be the equivalent of the notion of factuality would require a protracted and in-depth conceptual analysis of the Arabic lexicon in a number of historical and generic contexts; the question in fact goes far beyond that of a mere linguistic problem, since it would need to take into account the complexities of cultural translation. Secondly, we must consider that the current classification schemes, for instance literary genres, are modeled in accordance with European usage (e.g., "historiography," "fiction," "scientific texts," "belles-lettres"), which will need to be meticulously decolonized and historicized in order to arrive at a nuanced account.

Unfortunately, there are hardly any preliminary studies that could help to establish an initial working basis. Whereas the problematic legitimacy and conventions of fictional narration in Medieval Arabic literature have already attracted the attention of scholars (Drory 1994, Leder 1998, Kennedy 2005, Toral-Niehoff 2015), the existence and characteristics of factual narratives have scarcely been discussed as such (but see the insightful section on "Historians

and the Truth" in Robinson 2003, 143–145) (--> V.2 von Contzen). The issue of the reliability and truthfulness of Arabic historians has no doubt produced a wealth of scholarly discussion in modern research (Donner 2010), but the purpose of this debate has primarily been to utilize the texts as sources for the reconstruction of past realities, not to examine the status of these texts from the perspective of their factuality.

However we may interpret the standard viewpoint on factuality in Arabic, it seems that the factual is to be considered the standard stance in classical Medieval Arabic literature:

> […] anyone well-versed in classical Arabic literature knows what a great effort it makes to persuade the reader (or listener) that it is telling us nothing but authentic facts. Having developed primarily out of religious motivations, classical Arabic prose is very much occupied with the "truth" or "falsehood" of its texts. (Drory 1994, 146)

This quotation neatly highlights the widespread scholarly consensus regarding the non-legitimacy of fictional prose, emphasizing the low status of fictional narrative which is relegated to the realm of low-prestige popular literature and storytelling (Toral-Niehoff 2015). This viewpoint also suggests that nearly all narratives in Medieval Arabic high literature claim a factual status, factuality thus being the default-case ("telling […] facts" –Drory 1994, 146). However, a closer look at the matter opens up a whole array of unanswered questions. Does Medieval Arabic literature *really* pretend to deal with the factual, here understood as referring to verifiable facts, or can we not rather detect a different (for instance, poetical, religious, incommensurable) concept of truth and reality? What would be the epistemic status of the uncertain, the exotic and the marvelous so prevalent in many of our texts? How can we explain the understanding of the concept of 'historical fact' deployed by the many historians who in their accounts include different and often contradictory narratives of the same event, as we will see below? What does it mean when some texts are disparaged as lies (Drory 1994, 147), a situation that could fruitfully be compared to similar reproaches expressed in European Medieval literature (Glauch 2014)? Are such recriminations meant to be interpreted as critiques of fictionality, as a moral judgment directed against the narrator or author, or as an indication of a case of failed factuality? And, finally, how should we classify the many Arabic prose works customarily labelled *adab* or 'belles-lettres,' among which we can find 'serious' history, but also a plethora of historical anecdotes and legends as well as poetical fragments (Toral-Niehoff 2018)?

For all these reasons, the following outline of factuality in Arabic literature starts with a series of strong caveats, emphasizing the provisional nature of my analysis. In what follows, I shall only focus on Muslim Arabic texts of high literature composed in Classical Arabic (thus leaving aside Jewish, Christian Arabic texts and popular literature) and on narratives dating from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries CE, which is to say coinciding roughly with the Medieval period in Europe. The texts treated in this contribution will therefore be labelled 'Medieval' for merely conventional reasons, and without implying any typological or structural analogy, much less connection, with the European concept of the Middle Ages. I will moreover concentrate on those two fields of knowledge in Islamic culture where one would first and foremost expect a concern for factuality: historiography, because of its defining reference to historical facts; and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), since, according to Islamic classical legal theory, law requires validation through the authentic prophetic tradition

(*hadith*) and therefore fostered the development of a highly sophisticated theoretical apparatus dedicated to the assessment of authenticity.

2. Historiography

The emergence of Arabic history-writing in Early Islam during the eighth century is a complex phenomenon. Historiography arose nearly concomitantly with the development of Arabic literacy *tout court*, and it was also synchronous with the constitution of a new religious and political community, the Islamic *umma*. On the one hand, Arabic historiography drew on the natural human impulses of remembering and commemorating the past, on the urge of narrating the self, and on the social practice of constructing and imagining a community with the help of meaningful narratives. On the other hand, these natural historiographic tendencies were culturally inflected, with history-writing in the Arabic world specifically dedicated to a concern for the life of the Prophet and of his companions and to providing guidance on moral, religious and political principles. Depending on their scope, these narratives had different points of reference – either the diverse Arab tribes, or the Pre-Islamic Empires that were considered as predecessors to the Islamic *umma*, or the *umma* itself, the Prophet and his charismatic community. From the eleventh century onwards, we also increasingly find the regional and urban perspective represented in the historical texts. In terms of textual traditions, one will have to assume a combination of autochthonous Arabic models of oral history and the influence of chronographic writing from Late Antiquity (Dūrī and Conrad 1983; Donner 1998, Robinson 2003).

The intention of early Islamic historiography, broadly speaking, concentrated less on the exact reporting of how events and facts "really happened" according to the famous maxim by Leopold von Ranke, but first and foremost on the aim of providing "meaning" (Müller 2004) for the Islamic community of believers. From this perspective, this history was written in a strongly rhetorical manner and included many fictionalizing elements aimed at enhancing the significance of the community and to convince the reader (Meisami 2000; El-Hibri 1999). In this respect, Islamic historiography parallels Medieval European historiography, which also featured many characteristics of fictional narratives and has been criticized for shifting in such an irritating manner between the fictional and the factual (Hoyland 2006). European medievalists employ the term "functional fictionality" (Müller 2004) to designate a fictionality which *reshapes and fictionalizes* already existing historical material but does not *invent* a fictional world of its own (as does the autonomous fictionality associated with modern literature (Müller 2004; Glauch 2014; --> V.2 von Contzen). Functional fictionality is a category which I regard also as highly suitable for the analysis of early Arabic prose, since it helps to capture its irritating ambivalence and indeterminacy between history and fiction. Despite the fictionalizing tendencies of their texts, Arabic historians themselves demonstrate a general awareness of the dangers of fabrication, exaggeration and bias; they also comment on the impossibility of certain historical knowledge in the recurring use of phrases like "as far as I can tell" or "according to what I have been told […]" (Robinson 2003, 144).

One of the strategies of underpinning their accounts by strategies underlining historical factuality was the inclusion in their texts of archival material such as letters, treaties and lengthy speeches which were quoted verbatim. Some of these documents, however, are manifestly inauthentic (as one can see from the blatant anachronisms which one can detect), and the historicity of others is possible but remains very difficult to assess, since we lack the

originals. Though the existence of official documents since early times is beyond doubt, little material has survived from before the fifteenth century. Over time, the practice of quoting archival material in historiography became more and more frequent and the authenticity of the quoted material more probable, since many of the historians were bureaucrats and judges and presumably not only had access to archives, but were also well trained in the bureaucratic routines of recording and documenting. For instance, it sounds very plausible that ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (d.1201), himself a bureaucrat working as secretary and record keeper, wrote his biography of Saladin "The Syrian Thunderbolt" (*al-Barq al-Shāmī*) based on his authentic diary and on personal memos, documents and correspondence. It is also at the times of the Crusades (eleventh to fourteenth centuries) that historians increasingly start to report on events that happened during their lifetime, some of them having been eye-witnesses, which makes these accounts particularly vivid and realistic (Robinson 2003, 144–148).

It needs to be emphasized, however, that in legal and ethical discourse one can detect a much stronger concern for factuality and the authenticity of the historical material as well as a more systematic approach to the question, since here the facts in question had legal consequences and binding moral character for the community. For analytical reasons, I will for the moment leave aside the legal implications and return to it again briefly in the second part of this chapter. Both aspects – the historical and the moral/legal – frequently appear entangled in the same text, especially since many history writers were also legal scholars and were very much influenced by legal thinking. This was, for instance, the case for the emblematic al-Ṭabarī (839–923 CE), author of the "History of the Prophets and the Kings" (*Ta'rīkh al-rusūl wa-l-mulūk*), a world chronicle that became the master narrative of Islamic history and served as the standard model for later historians. There is also the case of the city chronicles like the "History of Damascus" (*Ta'rīkh Dimashq*) by Ibn ʿAsākir (1106–1175 CE) and the "History of Baghdad" (*Ta'rīkh Baghdād*) by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (1002–1071); these are basically inventories of scholars' biographies of huge dimensions and functioned as vehicles of local pride and self-affirmation for the broad class of Islamic scholars, who were well trained in Islamic law and therefore accustomed to its modes of authentication. On the other hand, we also find historical works less influenced by legal discourse, such as "The Meadows of Gold" (*Murūj al-dhahab*) by al-Masʿūdī (d. 957), a mixture of geographical treatise, travelogue and history more entertaining in tone, and without a delineation of transmission chains.

Finally, there are two noteworthy features in early chronicles (ca. eighth to tenth centuries) that deserve a closer look in the context of factual narrativity. The first of these is what I would like to call the *episodic component*. Historiography was usually structured into a series of brief episodes (*khabar*, "report") told in a realistic style externally focalized with a swift tempo in a diegetic "showing" mode; this has come to be labeled the "hard-boiled" style of Arabic discourse in allusion to the typical style of Ernest Hemingway, which imitated journalistic discourse (Beaumont 1996). However, the impression of realism evoked by this kind of writing, probably under the impact of everyday conversational storytelling and the traditions of oral history, does not necessarily signify factuality. The texts that I am referring to are characterized by having an author or compiler of the frame, the collection of narratives, who is distinct from the separate narrators of the episodes, who are often eyewitnesses or secondhand reporters of the events they recount. In fact, the author or compiler in many cases lived several centuries after the narrators of the episodes and of the events. Another central strategy of this genre is the frequent use of personal names, exact toponymy and direct quotations.

An extract from the *History* by al-Ṭabarī offers an example of these strategies. The text is introduced by the delineation of the chain of transmission (*isnād*) (for this mode of authentication see below) and the recounting of a short episode told by an eyewitness. The narrator is an otherwise unknown soldier in the army of the protagonist, Khālid b. al-Walīd, one of the most famous commanders during the Islamic Conquests in Iraq and Syria, and the episode is said to have occurred before the great and decisive battle of Yarmūk in 636, won by the Muslims against the Byzantines:

> [*chain of transmission*] Al-Sarī – Shuʿayb – Sayf – ʿAmr b. Muḥammad, Isḥḥāq b. Ibrāhīm – Ẓafar b. Dahī:

> Khālid led us to attack from Suwā [*place name*] to Muṣayyakh Baḥrāʾ [*place name*] in al-Quṣwānā [*place name*], one of the waterholes. We took al-Musayyakh [*place name*] and the Namir [*tribal name*][1] by morning when they were unaware and when the company were drinking in the face of the morning, while their cupbearer was singing to them, saying,

> Should you two not rouse me in the morning before the army of Abū Bakr?

> Then his head was cut off and his blood was mixed with his wine.

> [*the text continues with another report, accompanied by a different chain of transmission*] (Ṭabarī 1993, 115).

The historicity of this episode is dubious in part due to its use of literary topos and foreboding atmosphere; the scene functions as a harbinger of the imminent disaster that will strike the Christians. Nevertheless, despite these literary strategies, the episode is framed as an eyewitness report and contains exact topographical data that suggest a factual stance.

To further complicate matters, the same episode might be quoted, re-used and reshaped in different textual environments and, depending on context, will serve a number of different functions. For instance, the narrative might sometimes appear as part of a universal chronicle, at others in a collection of belles-lettres, in a legal handbook, a local history, or in a geographical work. The sheer volume of recycled material in the Arabic tradition is enormous, and we are only beginning to evaluate this vast corpus. In relation to our topic of factuality, these different contexts are crucial to an analysis of the very different audiences that will read these episodes and their generic expectations, which will differ from one context to the next. Thus, the same short narrative – perhaps with slight variations – will appear numerous times in quite different frames, resulting in a multiplicity of generic conventions and receptual attitudes brought to bear on the story, though the narrative itself will not necessarily greatly change its form.

The second feature in early chronicles pertains to a very peculiar structure which I would like to call its *multifocal component*. This consists in the coexistence of a wide array of oppositional narratives about the same event. The resulting multivocality has a puzzling effect on the modern reader; it has also continued to hamper the reconstruction of historical events and of their proper chronological sequence. As an illustration of this problem, let us turn to Jens Scheiner's study of the Islamic conquest of Damascus in the early seventh century.

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[1] The Namir is the name of a Christian tribe, the place a certain waterhole in the Syrian desert.

Scheiner collected over 1200 diverging reports on this event, many of them culled from the same collection, namely the aforementioned "History of Damascus" by Ibn al-ʿAsākir. Although he was able to reconstruct clusters and transmission bundles that allowed him to gather this multiplicity of sources into a few main strands of events and themes and to establish a chronology, substantive historical insights remained meagre. Any definitive reconstruction of the historical facts, and even many key details of the historical record, continue to elude the historian (Scheiner 2010, 483–495). Faced with such an author/compiler who quotes extensively various conflicting narrative versions, how can we arrive at a concept of historical reality and of what we would consider to be facts? In the accounts of such compilers, regardless of whether or not they demonstrate a clear or indirect preference for one of the many existing versions of a historical event, they still feel obligated to list and quote all the others. Does such an author assume a multiple and ambiguous reality, does he want to display his stupendous erudition, is he presenting a comprehensive view on controversial events by giving voice to all parties, or is definitive truth or 'fact' for him simply incompatible with the recognition that certainty in this world is impossible because it is only available to God the Omniscient? All these questions merit a much deeper analysis in modern discussions of factuality, but cannot be undertaken here.

3. Islamic law and prophetic tradition

According to classical Islamic majoritarian Sunni theory – because of the provisional character of this chapter, the also widespread Shii legal theory cannot be contemplated here –, the jurist or legal scholar (*faqīh*) was tasked with interpreting divinely revealed legal texts (contained in the Quran and in the *sunna*, i.e. the corpus of the verbally recorded prophetic teachings or utterances and deeds) and, if necessary, with extending their application by analogy (*qiyās*). The veracity of revelation was simply assumed by the lawyer; it was the theologian's business to formulate and demonstrate the principles of divine truth. Rather, the main methodological challenge for the legal scholar was the problem that, whereas the Quran was considered as an identifiable whole of absolutely authenticity, the authenticity of the transmitted pieces of the *sunna*, the so-called *hadith*, first had to be verified one by one in order to be validated for legal purposes (Zysow 2013, 7–48). For this reason, questions concerning the authentication of transmitted material occupy considerable space in Muslim thinking: "Sunni Islam is at heart a cult of authenticity, with the science of ḥadīth criticism functioning as a centerpiece designed to distinguish authentic attributions to the Prophet from forgeries" (Brown 2011, 1). Although *hadith* was also used in other contexts, for instance in theology, history (compare above on the episodical component) and mysticism, and of course also by Shiis, I will here focus solely on its use in Sunni law.

Formed as a report or short narrative, *hadith* offers accounts by a number of different people to one another of sayings or actions by the Prophet. At the beginning of the chain stands the original transmitter, a reporter who, ideally, is an eyewitness and a contemporary of the Prophet, for instance a companion; the subsequent transmitters (*isnād*) together with the text itself (the *matn*) form the whole hadith or transmission unit. Here is an example from the *hadith* collection by Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī (d. 889):

> [*isnād*] Abū Dāwūd writes: it was narrated to us by Muhᴑammad b. Dāwūd b.
> Sufyān: it was narrated to us by Yahḥyā b. Ḥassān: it was narrated to us by Sulaymān

b. Mūsā: it was narrated to us by Jaʿfar b. Saʿd: it was narrated to me by Khubayb b. Sulaymān, from his father, from the Companion Samura b. Jundub, who said:

[*matn*] Indeed the Messenger of God, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him, would order us to pay the charity task on things that we were preparing for sale. (quoted in Brown 2009, 7–8)

Two criteria were crucial in establishing the legal validity of a given *hadith*: first, it was important to secure the integrity of the chain of transmission or *isnād* (e.g. by investigating the biographical data and reliability of the transmitters) in order to establish its authenticity. Secondly, it was necessary to classify the *hadith* as either a "concurrent and widespread report" (*khabar mutawātir* and *mashhūr*) or as "unit-reports" (*khabar wāḥid*) (Zysow 2013, 9). This was the task of the traditional *hadith* scholars, who developed a highly sophisticated system of *hadith* authentication and established a scale of decreasing reliability (Brown 2009, 67–122). In legal thinking, the first type of *hadith* – the more prevalent variant – was usually accepted as the more valid legal source. The precise number of transmissions that constituted a 'widespread' report was a matter of debate but was of little importance; what was crucial, however, was that the standard definition of the so-called "widespread report" was "a report of something sensible by a group of people whom experience precludes from acting (and thus lying) in concert" (Zysow 2013, 9). Put differently, the assessment of the veracity of the knowledge transmitted via the *hadith* ultimately depended on criteria grounded in human experience (and not on theological, absolute truth), and as a consequence of this the resulting knowledge could only be classified according to a scale of probability. According to Aron Zysow, these circumstances led to a development that privileged legal formalism in most legal schools, thus ensuring the validity of legal practice merely through the legitimacy of its framework (legitimacy being conferred on the basis of information having been classified as valid by hadith criticism). As Zysow notes, this approach thus represented a quite skeptical attitude towards the human ability of obtaining certainty regarding historical truth and factuality (3). In contrast to Zysow's view, Jonathan Brown maintains that at least early scholars believed that they could establish the historical truth of a *hadith*'s narrative through the authentication of its transmission chain (Brown 2011).

It would go far beyond the scope of this brief chapter to discuss the intricate details of Islamic legal theory and *hadith* criticism, whose sophistication cannot be underestimated and which exists in various, quite diverse schools. My purpose in this chapter has been to demonstrate how these legal arguments might be relevant to the conception and reflection on factuality in the Arabic Medieval textual tradition, given their patent concern with issues of probability, certainty, authenticity, plausibility, veracity as well as historical and literal truth. While Arabic literary criticism has focused primarily on poetry and not on narrative texts, it is scholars of Islamic law and *hadith* criticism who have dedicated their efforts to the testing and establishment of factuality in the short narratives which are their focus of study, namely the transmission units of the *sunna*, the *hadith*.

The relevance of these debates also extends into many fields of knowledge outside hadith and jurisprudence. As has been explained above, hadith reports and historical episodes share a very similar structure and are often framed in a comparable way. Furthermore, literary anthologies, geographical dictionaries and encyclopedic works contained historical anecdotes that were often authenticated by a transmission chain, e.g. the "Great Book of Songs" (*Kitāb*

al-Aghānī) byAbū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. 967) and the various writings by Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī (d. 845). Another example to mention is the extraordinarily rich biographical literature in Arabic (Young 1990), which also concerns itself with the assessment of authenticity. Michael Cooperson has formulated the thesis that for biographical reports it was less the establishment of what actually occurred that determined the authenticity of the text but its soundness in terms of the transmission chain (as in the case of *hadith* validation). A biography was thus classified on the formal criterion of the transmission chain and therefore in accordance with a scale of plausibility, leaving the ordinary reader "blessedly exempt from the obligation of assessing (its veracity)" (Cooperson 2005, 77).

4. Conclusion

As I have argued, the core of the debate about authenticity, historical truth and probability in Islamic culture can be found in the context of the validation of prophetical tradition (*hadith*), which was deemed significant because of its manifold functions in theology, ethics and law. This led to sophisticated techniques – in particular, by means of the evaluation of the transmission chain – to establish a scale of reliability. The *hadith* tradition seems to have influenced many areas of knowledge such as history, philology and law, and it has produced interesting theoretical speculations as well as a strong skepticism concerning human unreliability and inability to reach absolute truth or certainty. The factual status of texts is often linked to an episodic narrative structure, that of the short report, often narrated by an eyewitness and displaying a plethora of referential proper names. Other strategies for establishing factuality, for instance quotations from archival material, were more common only in historiography and biography. It is hoped that the comparative analysis of the Islamic concern with authenticity can contribute to the study of factuality in its European context.

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